Belgacom and France Telecom battle it out for Telindus

When France Telecom made a friendly counter-bid for network company Telindus on Wednesday 15 December, most papers thought that a higher bid from Belgacom was unlikely (see p. 2). With its bid price of EUR 15.8 per share, France Telecom was offering 17% more than the EUR 13.50 offered by Belgacom. The difference was too great, and most observers thought that Belgacom CEO Didier Bellens would concede defeat. However, on 15 December the Belgacom board of directors decided to make a counter-bid of EUR 16.60 per share. That is 1 cent above the statutory minimum for a counter-bid. The difference between the first and second Belgacom bids means that Telindus’ value has been upped by a quarter. The new bid is valid until 6 January (FF).

For weeks the Belgacom camp was quoted as saying that EUR 13.50 was fair. Behind the scenes it was even whispered that that price was already on the high side. Why Belgacom now wants to pay so much more is not immediately clear. Bellens probably mainly wants to prevent France Télécom, the owner of Mobistar (the second largest mobile-phone operator after the Belgacom subsidiary Proximus) from playing a more dominant role on the Belgian market.

It is now a question of waiting and seeing how France Télécom reacts. The French group has three options: it can withdraw its bid, let it run, or raise it. According to Luk Van Eylen, spokesman for the stock exchange supervisory authority CBFA, the French bid does not automatically lapse because of the new offer from Belgacom. The Telindus board of directors has to give its opinion on the two bids next week,’ he says. But if France Télécom withdraws, Telindus only has to examine the still hostile bid from Belgacom.

The Telindus board of directors has to give its opinion on the two bids next week,’ he says. But if France Télécom withdraws, Telindus only has to examine the still hostile bid from Belgacom. A possible counter-bid would have to be made by 4 January at the latest, and would have to be at least 5% higher. It won’t be coming from the British telecom group BT. BT lodged a counter-bid for Telindus, just like France Télécom, but the Belgian company opted for the French offer. ‘For BT it’s over. They decided from the word go not to get involved in a bidding war,’ a source close to the British group was quoted as saying.

Table page 4.

INTRODUCTION

In election years, as we know, parties are more eager in their desire to create a profile for themselves, and are not easily tempted into making compromises, with the result that few important decisions are taken. After the federal elections of 2003 and the regional elections of 2004, 2005 therefore had to provide for a respite. The Federal Government has taken advantage of this to push through its Generation Pact, a first cautious reform of the career-end arrangements and the social security system. For the Flemish Government, the reform agenda has by no means reaped the bill was approved in Parliament in the night of 15/16 December. Trade unions and employers now have to negotiate new conditions governing the regulations for early retirement. But the union opposition to the pact seems to have subsided. The generally militant socialist union announced that it was abandoning general strikes. In the political parties the feverish autumn has mainly caused some collateral damage within the socialist movement, where parties (SP.A and PS) and union have often locked horns. The coalition partner, the Liberal VLD, has recorded a minor success with the Generation Pact. And it was high time, too. In 2004 the party experienced a divisive internal battle on immigrants’ voting rights and a little later saw its Prime Minister Guy Verhofstadt fail in his attempt to keep the courier company DHL in Zaventem. In the opinion polls the VLD took a nose dive. Now it appears to have regained its self-confidence and according to some papers is already preparing for the municipal elections of 2006 and the big test – the federal elections of 2007.

The way things are looking at the moment, writes De Standaard (14 December), we are heading for a titanic struggle between Verhofstadt and the Flemish Minister-President Yves Leterme (CD&V) for the prime ministership. Leterme is the man of New Realism and his popularity is perhaps the main asset in the electoral campaign of the CD&V-Nav-A alliance. He will inevitably also be the target of campaigns orchestrated by his political opponents. This can be done, for example, so the paper says, by putting his leadership qualities to the test within his government. The fact that VLD MPs ranted and raved so conspicuously in the fuss kicked up over the law on penalties for juvenile offenders, the speed limit for lorries and the service cheques for child minding (pages 5 and 6) should be viewed in the light of this strategy, in the paper’s view. The VLD wants to create the impression that as leader of the Flemish Government, Leterme is not able to put the house in order in his government within a reasonable period. Just before it all got completely out of hand and the VLD were accused of rabble rousing (De Morgen 14 December), Guy Verhofstadt appeared on the scene, like a ministering angel, with a compromise. He can step in because in the three disputed matters a part of the competency lies with the federal authorities. Leterme’s move is able to limit the damage by pointing out that who scores is not important, as long as there is good management. But for Leterme the road to 2007 is still a long one, the paper concludes. In the meantime the situation that applied when the Flemish Government was formed is still applicable today: the three parties currently in office are condemned to get along, for there is no alternative.

Frank Vandecaveye | editor in chief
Telindus: France Télécom outbids Belgacom

THE REFERENCE SHAREHOLDERS AND THE COMPANY'S BOARD OF DIRECTORS SUPPORT THE BID

BERT BROENS • DE TIJD • 15 DECEMBER

According to specialists, theoretically Belgacom has three possibilities. The telecom group can for the time being let its hostile bid, which took effect on 5 December, run through to 20 December and publish its result. The Telindus shareholders who brought in their securities can withdraw them again, but also sell them to Belgacom. However, the chance of the latter occurring is very slim, given the substantial mark-up offered by France Télécom on Belgacom’s bidding price. The Belgian group will then have no option but to conclude that it has got nowhere near the intended 75% of Telindus, and that the bid has failed. That will probably lead to the withdrawal. The second scenario, in which Belgacom withdraws its bid, has the same effect. Previously Belgacom could not throw in the towel. Now, with a counter-bid, it can. The third way out amounts to Belgacom bettering France Télécom’s bid. Legally this would mean making a counter-bid at least 5% higher than the French group’s offer, which is EUR 15.80 per share. Belgacom would therefore have to offer EUR 16.59 or more, a price that values Telindus at EUR 594 million. That is EUR 111 million more than what Belgacom was initially prepared to stump up.

Most observers assume that Belgacom is not prepared to make such an effort. Belgacom does not have a tradition of costly takeovers, something that already became apparent with the failed bid for the Czech telecom company Cesky Telecom. What is more, Telindus has in the meantime become a very troubled dossier. Belgacom set its prey and the political and economic public at large against it by aggressively launching a hostile bid for another listed company. There were rumblings even in the company’s own board of directors and in the federal government, which controls Belgacom.

So it looks as though Belgacom will end up acknowledging defeat. If Belgacom quits, Telindus will not automatically fall into the hands of France Télécom. A third bid is still possible, for example from the British telecom group BT. However, this would necessarily also be a hostile bid, and would therefore stand less chance. Telindus is already supporting France Télécom’s move and cannot back a second bid.

WWW.BELGACOM.BE
WWW.FRANCETELECOM.COM
WWW.TELINDUS.BE

ABVV shifts action against Generation Pact to index

EVELYNE HENS • DE TIJD • 14 DECEMBER

The federal government asked the social partners to adopt a position on the wage derailment before Christmas. Wages in Belgium are rising this and next year by 2.1% faster than German, French and Dutch wages. This means that the wage gap in respect of the neighbouring countries runs to 2.9% since 1996.

The Christmas timing will not be met. The senior negotiators of the social partners will be seeing each other next week for exploratory discussions. The meeting was put off until the rumpus over the Generation Pact had died down. Nevertheless, on the negotiating table, in addition to the matter of wage derailment, there will still be adjustments for the Generation Pact. The trade unions are asking, among other things, for an acceptable arrangement for the equated periods and a broad definition of stressful professions. The employers are prepared to engage in that debate, but in exchange are demanding concessions from the unions on the wage derailment. ‘We have to seek a balance between the matters,’ says Pieter Timmermans, director-general of the VBO. The ABVV is not prepared to do that. The trade union rejects any debate that goes towards wage forfeiting, unwarranted wage restraint or meddling with the index. The ABVV also regards the imposition of all-in wage agreements, as suggested by NBB governor Guy Quaden last week, as unacceptable.
Economy

Airports in Flanders

An airport for the Scheldt Delta area

A regional airport would save Flemish, Zeeland and Antwerp companies a lot of time, says minister Peeters

The solution-in-the-making for the noise pollution around the airport of Zaventem will have considerable adverse effects for Flemish companies in the provinces of East Flanders and Antwerp (Antwerp), says Public Works Minister Kris Peeters (CD&V). At a meeting of the NEDWerken of the Scheldt Delta and Antwerp Euregion, he therefore argued in favour of a large regional airport. The Scheldt Delta Euregion embraces Dutch Zeeland (Vlissingen), Zeeland Flanders (Terneuzen), the north of the provinces of East and West Flanders (Ghent and Bruges) and the port area of the Antwerp Left Bank. A regional airport would save Flemish, Zeeland and Antwerp companies a lot of time, says the minister. It will be the task of the Flemish airport committee to ascertain what the specific assignment of such an airport would be: passenger transport, cargo or both (FF).

Kris Barrezeele • De Tijd • 10 December

The Flemish Public Works Minister Kris Peeters (CD&V) has replied in the affirmative to the question raised by the Dutch Chamber of Commerce for Belgium and Luxembourg, as to whether Flanders and Zeeland still needed a (regional) airport. Minister Peeters did not comment on whether this regional airport should use an existing or a new airfield, and where it should be sited. These are matters for the business community to decide on. The private sector will be responsible for building and running the airport and making it profitable. The Flemish Government’s sole ambition is to keep the existing regional airports open until they can be handed over to the private sector. At most it wants to concern itself with safety and security. Not every economic intersection or every city of any size in Flanders needs an airport. However the Scheldt Delta, which is of incalculable economic importance to Flanders and the Southern Netherlands, does. An airport with optimal spatial planning without stifling environmental and traffic restrictions. An airport right in the economic heart of the Low Countries, which meets the real needs of the business community from this area and is not, like Zaventem, tributary to the whims of arrogant Brussels city politicians. www.ministerkrispeeters.be

Banks

KBC becomes sole owner of Hungarian K&H Bank

The Flemish provider of combined banking and insurance services KBC is paying EUR 510 million for a 40.2% stake in the Hungarian K&H Bank. This means that KBC will hold 99.6% of the shares. KBC announced that it was now also buying out the minority shareholders in the other Central-European subsidiaries CSOB (Czech Republic), NLB (Slovenia) and the insurance company Warta (Poland) (FF).

Nico Tanghe • De Tijd • 13 December

With a 20% contribution to the profit in the third quarter, Central Europe is KBC’s signboard to the outside world. Because the economy there is growing much faster than in the Belgian domestic market, the bank-cum-insurer is constantly looking for ways of expanding its market share in this promising region. Because new acquisitions in Central and Eastern Europe are relatively costly, KBC already announced at the beginning of this year that it would concentrate on buying out the minority shareholders in the existing subsidiaries. The acquisition of the minority stake in the Hungarian K&H Bank is the first dossier successfully completed. The situation of fellow shareholder ABN AMRO is not dissimilar. The Dutch bank announced that it wanted to dispose of a number of non-core-business activities, among other things to finance the takeover of the Italian merchant bank Antonveneta. Because KBC had a preferential right of purchase, the transaction is no surprise, although for some analysts, the price is. According to an ABN AMRO spokesman, the Dutch bank recorded a capital gain of EUR 200 million. That means that KBC has paid 2.3 times the book value. On the other side of the coin, however, is the fact that the takeover immediately contributes to KBC’s profit. Analysts expect that KBC will also increase its existing interests in Poland, the Czech Republic and Slovenia. The main targets include the Polish insurance company Warta, the Czech CSOB and the Slovenian NLB.

www.kbc.be
www.khb.hu

Breweries

Inbev close to takeover of large Chinese brewer

According to the New York Times, Inbev, the Belgian-Brazilian beer group, with its head office in Leuven, has offered EUR 636 million for the Chinese brewing company Fujian Sedrin Brewery. Inbev has thereby reportedly made the highest bid for the eighth largest Chinese brewer, and been given priority over Heineken and Anheuser-Busch. The acquisition still has to receive the approval of the Chinese authorities. According to De Tijd (10 December) it is known that InBev regards China as strategically important. China is now already the largest beer market in the world, although the per capita consumption there, at 19 litres per person per year, is appreciably lower than the 80 litres a year in Europe. On the down side are the low price of beer and the mediocre margins. Currently Inbev is already the third largest brewer on the Chinese market and, with 28 production plants there, chiefly in the southern provinces of Jiangsu, Guangdong, Zhejiang, Hubei and Hunan, has a market share there of 10%. Sedrin is market leader in another southern province, Fujian.

www.ministerkrispeeters.be
Flemish tax cut

When fully implemented, the easing of the tax and premium burden will cost half a billion euros a year and is one of the showpieces of the Flemish coalition agreement.

From 2007 one million working Flemings with an annual taxable income of up to EUR 21,000 will be receiving a tax reduction of EUR 125 per year. This will be raised to EUR 150 in 2008 and to EUR 200 in 2009. What is more, in that year the tax rebate will apply to all working Flemings. Budget Minister Dirk Van Mechelen (VLD) wants to use this tax cut to make working more attractive. The measure was approved in the Flemish Government on 9 December. It does not apply to those receiving benefit, since the whole purpose of it is to make working more attractive again. However, the VLD, a great supporter of the tax cut, had to acknowledge that it would cost more than had been estimated (FF).

BART HAECK • DE TIJD • 10 DECEMBER

When fully implemented, the easing of the tax and premium burden will cost half a billion euros a year and is one of the showpieces of the Flemish coalition agreement. By having anyone who is in employment pay less tax, the Flemish Government wants to make working more attractive, so that there is a greater difference between a first wage and a benefit payment. The tax cut is being introduced in three steps. In 2007 blue-collar workers, white-collar workers, the self-employed, civil servants and the liberal professions are only eligible if they have an annual net taxable income of less than EUR 21,000. The income brackets are determined in such a way that one million Flemings will be able to benefit from the tax cut in the first stage, already feeling the effect of the cut in 2007. The money will be set off against the advance corporation tax. Anyone earning less than EUR 5,500 a year will not receive the rebate, because the government wants to help get more people into work, says Dirk Van Mechelen’s spokesman. In the next few weeks the Flemish Government will be asking for an opinion from the Council of State, whereupon it will table the draft decree for the tax cut in the Flemish Parliament.

WWW.DIRKVANMECHELEN.BE

EUR 150 million more for jobs in Flanders

In addition to the tax cut, the Flemish Government is setting aside an extra EUR 150 million for the creation of more jobs. It wants to invest around a third of this amount in the region around the airport of Zaventem. Employment Minister Frank Vandenbroucke will be using a second installment of EUR 50 million to organise the labour market more effectively. A third measure is aimed at the employment of the unskilled, the disabled, immigrants and older people. The intention is to award employers a grant if they recruit workers from these difficult labour-market niches. The extra budget comes largely from the federal government, which is transferring EUR 182 million in surplus revenue to Flanders. The registration fees on the sale of immovable property (a Flemish tax) again represented a windfall this year (FF).

GUY TEGENBOS • DE STANDAARD • 10 DECEMBER

The EUR 150 million is intended for socio-economic projects such as the START plan for the development of new companies around the airport of Zaventem. The ‘alternative financing’ (private investors ed.) for this is not forthcoming, so the funds must come out of the budget. In the corridors Zaventem is called a CD&V project. So Frank Vandenbroucke (SP.A) wants ‘a few forceful measures’ to see to it that the labour market operates in a swifter and more effective manner: a hefty cut in wage costs for the over-50s who want to come back to work, in addition to the already announced plan to combat youth unemployment in the major centres. He also wants to see more immigrants working and also wants vacancies to be filled more quickly. One line of thinking is to extend the existing Job-Kanaal that gives immigrant applicants extra opportunities and to have certain vacancies offered to job-seekers of foreign extraction for three weeks via a closed circuit.

Vandenbroucke wants to hold talks on this with the social partners next week. He also wants to give them the certainty that the negotiations on the Flemish measures that have to run parallel with the Generation Pact are ‘serious’. He can only say that convincingly if there is money for it. And there is. There are still ‘buffers’ in the Flemish budget, so it emerged last week. It is perfectly sensible to draw on part of that money now, according to CD&V and SPA. The VLD was on the defensive, since yesterday it was forced to concede that the tax cut cost more than had been estimated, with the result that the balance in the political breakdown of the budget had been broken. That was put right by setting aside money for projects which unofficially bear a CD&V or an SP.A label.

WWW.MINISTERFRANKVANDENBROUCKE.BE

Top ten of Belgian companies (Trends 30,000) ranking of 2004 based on net profit (million euro)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Company Name</th>
<th>Net Profit (2004)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ExxonMobil Petrol &amp; Chemistry</td>
<td>3,037,100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Suez-Tractebel</td>
<td>1,421,641</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hewlett-Packard C.C.</td>
<td>1,037,085</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Electrabel</td>
<td>936,071</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Proximus Belgacom Mobile</td>
<td>645,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vlaamse Vlaivestigingsmaatschappij</td>
<td>634,587</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SIDMAR</td>
<td>607,351</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Belgacom</td>
<td>544,034</td>
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<tr>
<td>UCB</td>
<td>444,123</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Janssen Pharmaceutica</td>
<td>432,771</td>
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</tbody>
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focus on FLANDERS • 10 December - 16 December 2005 • Number 47
Leterme examines support for manure treatment

Flemish farmers can dispose of the manure surplus, by exporting it or processing it. If neither of these options is successful, a reduction of their livestock is inevitable.

As a result of the European Commission’s decision that the whole of Flanders should be designated as a vulnerable area, from now on only very limited manuring of fields can be carried out in the whole of Flanders. This will result in the manure surplus in Flanders growing from 18 to 32 million kilos of nitrogen. Flemish farmers can dispose of this manure surplus in two ways, by exporting it or processing it. If neither of these options is successful, a reduction of their livestock is inevitable. Joris Relaes, principal private secretary to Agriculture Minister Yves Leterme (CD&V), visited the private secretary to Agriculture Minister Joris Relaes, principal private secretary to Agriculture Minister Yves Leterme (CD&V), visited the European Commission’s agriculture services to sound out the chances of a European subsidy for manure treatment services to sound out the chances of a European subsidy for manure treatment (FF).

Bernard Bulcke and Guy Tegenbos • De Standaard • 10 December

Joris Relaes: ‘We went to the European Commission’s agriculture services to obtain clarity on a number of possible measures for getting rid of the manure surplus. Manure treatment is one of those possibilities. In the past Flanders had come up against a “no” from the European Commission for specific projects for the subsidising of manure treatment, since they were not in keeping with the competition rules. But the Commission has now confirmed to us that there is absolutely no objection in principle to support to investments for manure treatment. In Brittany there is one such company that received permitted investment support. The question is: is this in keeping with the competition rules? That’s what it’s all about.’

The Flemish delegation has also learnt that manure treatment which also falls under the heading ‘generation of alternative energy’ (bio-energy) has a greater chance of receiving support. So as yet there is no talk of an agreement with the European Commission on a possible project. ‘And anyway, there is no project yet’, says principal private secretary Joris Relaes. ‘We haven’t yet decided whether we want to introduce this subsidisation’. Such a proposal will be ready at the earliest half way through next year, and quite possibly later. Only then can an official procedure be started up with the European Commission for the green light to be given for the government aid.

http://europa.eu.int/comm/commission_barroso/dimas
www.yvesleterme.be

SP.A and VLD quarrel about speed limit for lorries

If the 80 km/h limit is not introduced, both the Federal and Flemish Government have a serious problem, SP.A chairman Vande Lanotte said

FF Editor

The matter of the speed limit for lorries is also causing quite a rumpus in the Flemish Government coalition. Here again the VLD is at loggerheads with the SP.A. According to Transport Minister Kathleen Van Brempt (SP.A), an 80km/h speed limit for lorries could bring down the number of traffic fatalities by 8%. When this measure is combined with a speed restrictor, a ban on overtaking and enforcement, the number of deaths could even come down by as much as 15%, claims Van Brempt, basing her assertions on a study by the Regional Office for Road Safety, which was presented in the Flemish Parliament. A second advantage of such a measure, so Van Brempt announced, is that it would entail a reduction of CO2 emissions of between 5 and 15%. Here the minister based her claims on a study by the Flemish institute for technological research into air pollution. According to the VLD there is nothing about such a speed limit in the coalition agreement. For that matter the party has serious doubts about the conclusions of the studies on which Van Brempt is basing herself. The VLD says that a lowering of the speed limit also means that these lorries would be on the road for longer, and that the transport sector would be faced with a hefty bill. They were backed in this latter criticism by the CD&V.

The Liberals also threw their heavy artillery into the fray, in the shape of senator Jean-Marie De Decker. He immediately wiped the floor with the transport policy of SP.A ministers Van Brempt and Landuyt, and called Minister Van Brempt a liar. For SP.A chairman Vande Lanotte, this was going too far: if the 80 km/h limit is not introduced, both the Federal and Flemish Government have a serious problem, he said. Vande Lanotte said that he was prepared to talk about economic compensation for the transport sector. A phone call between Vande Lanotte and Prime Minister Verhofstadt (VLD) (De Standaard, 14 December) delivered the solution. A working group including various representatives from the governments, the Belgian Institute for Road Safety and the transport sector have to examine the measure’s economic costs and costs associated with the traffic situation. They will submit their report in three months’ time.

www.ministerkathleenvanbrempt.be
Compromise on juvenile criminal law rejected

FF EDITOR

After lengthy discussions the VLD and the CD&V have agreed on the matter of the law on sanctions for juvenile offenders. A bill drafted by Federal Justice Minister Laurrette Onkelinx (PS), which has already been approved in Parliament, stipulates that in the case of serious offences juvenile offenders will be referred to the normal courts for adults. But Flemish Welfare Minister Inge Vervotte (CD&V) does not agree with this. Together with her counterpart from the Government of the French-speaking Community, she wants juvenile courts to be given powers to punish juvenile offenders. Vervotte claims that for this she has the agreement of all the Flemish coalition partners, including the VLD. However, the latter party denies this most emphatically. Flemish Economic Affairs Minister Fientje Moerman (VLD) lodged a written protest in the form of a letter to Minister-President Leterme.

The VLD took the view that Vervotte’s proposal leads to a ‘light’ criminal law. The VLD and have questions about non-professional child minding. They opt for collective crèche services and the use of additional service cheques (FF).

MARK DEWEERDT • DE TIJD • 14 DECEMBER

For the extension of the service-cheque system to include child minding, Prime Minister Verhofstadt (VLD) stated that he wanted to adapt the Royal Decree on the federal service-cheque system and make ‘child-minding service cheques’ tax deductible. Minister-President Leterme is assuming that Verhofstadt also wants to make efforts to have the extra revenue from the child-minding service cheques flow back to Flanders. This relates to the unemployment benefits saved and the tax and social security contribution that the federal government receives from the child-minders working in the service-cheque system, less the tax deduction for the service cheques. The scope of the cost recovery effect is estimated at between EUR 1.5 and 15.8 million. However, Verhofstadt denied that he had promised to have the revenue flow back to Flanders.

Third problem: service cheques for child-minders

The liberal VLD want it to be possible for parents also to call on non-specialised child-minders deployed by temping agencies for crèche services and paid with service cheques, outside the normal hours of the institutionised day nurseries. SPA and CD&V regard the scheme as too expensive. They opt for collective crèche services and have questions about non-professional child minding. It appears that the compromise will consist in the extension of more regular crèche services and the use of additional service cheques (FF).

MARK DEWEERDT • DE TIJD • 14 DECEMBER

For the extension of the service-cheque system to include child minding, Prime Minister Verhofstadt (VLD)
Freya Vanden Bossche criticises Dutch cabinet

Despite Vanden Bossche’s mocking remarks on their appearance, the Dutch government decided to concern themselves with more serious business.

 Barely a few months after Foreign Affairs Minister Karel De Gucht, now it is Federal Deputy Prime Minister Freya Vanden Bossche (SP.A) who apparently cannot avoid letting fly at the Dutch cabinet of Jan Peter Balkenende. In an interview with Vrij Nederland, she called the Dutch ministers stuffy, narrow-minded and frumpy. On a previous occasion De Gucht had called Balkenende a combination of Harry Potter and an overly well-behaved and rigid bourgeois. Vanden Bossche realised that she had gone too far, and offered her apologies. There will not be any diplomatic row between Belgium and the Netherlands, as occurred at the time between De Gucht and Balkenende. Vanden Bossche’s Dutch colleague for budgetary affairs, Gerrit Zalm, compared her intervention to a Belgian joke, and Balkenende preferred to concern himself with more serious business. However, Vanden Bossche maintains her criticism of the policy pursued by the Balkenende government (FF).

LIESBETH VAN IMPE • DE MORGEN • 14 DECEMBER

In an interview with the weekly Vrij Nederland Deputy Prime Minister Freya Van den Bossche (SP.A) makes an unusually fierce attack on the Dutch government of Jan Peter Balkenende. She criticises the austerity measures and blames Balkenende for a ‘heartless’ policy. ‘Does that man desperately want to avoid being re-elected as Prime Minister?’ But she also makes some personal attacks, targeting Dutch ministers.

‘She’s saying what is also being said

A play about Brussels eurocrats

The technique of Blythe is resolutely journalistic. Interviews in the street or in trains are edited to support the story line.

Documentary theatre is the trademark of the British actress Alecky Blythe. She gained sudden popularity when she brought the longest act of kidnaping in recent British history to the stage with ‘Come Out Eli’. With I only came here for 6 months she has produced her first performance outside Great Britain. In it, she paints the picture of the Eurocrat who arrives in Brussels and ends up staying longer than planned. Her technique is resolutely journalistic. Interviews in the street, in trains or in bars are edited later, and in the meantime she devises a story line to go with them. The end result is somewhere between theatre and stand-up-comedy. In London she won a Time Out Award for her accessible, unpretentious theatrical approach. In ‘I only came here for 6 months’ she paints a social portrait of the Brussels Eurocrat (FF).

WOUTER HILLAERT • DE MORGEN • 15 DECEMBER

Blythe: ‘I always choose worlds with which I’m not familiar myself, in order then to open these up for others. There has to be an element of surprise. All you need is a good story. The rest is a question of editing. I always try to find a good balance between the story that I myself want to tell and entertaining quotes.’

Therefore in her interviews with Brussels Eurocrats, Blythe did not set out to find out about their political experiences, but rather aimed to discover the person behind the suit and tie. ‘I mainly concentrated on their social contact, when they go and have a beer when they finish work. Then you notice that there’s a lot of loneliness, combined with a strong feeling of homesickness. They shack up in their

own little bubble, with a new best friend every week. Mutual impregnation between Eurocrats is quite common, although the hierarchy in the office is seldom broken out of it. Interns have their own etiquette and I also spoke to cleaning staff. They have another different view of the senior-level staff, as do the normal Brussels residents who live amongst the Eurocrats in the European quarter.’

As well as a social portrait, I only came here for 6 months is also a collage of the engaging ‘euro-English’ that has taken on a form of its own among so many nationalities. ‘Because it’s copied so accurately on stage, you get not only a very funny effect, but also a story about how we communicate.’ Life as it really is, in other words.

WWW.KVS.BE
Diary

MUSIC, DANCE, THEATRE

• Until 31 December: Der Fliegende Holländer by Richard Wagner, director: Guy Cassiers, De Munt, Brussels; info: www.demunt.be 02/229 12 00

• Until 31 December: Senenl de WH Haendel, Opera in 3 acts, libretto after Metamorphoses by Ovidius, conductor: Michael Hofstetter, director: Robert Carlsen, Flanders Opera House, Ghent; info: www.vlaamsopera.be

• Until 31 December: 31 December: de Filharmonie with Dutch Chamber Choir, Anna Korondi, soprano, Jan Kobow, tenor, conductor: Philippe Herreweghe, Weihnachtsoratorium JS Bach, De Singel, Antwerp; info: www.desingel.be

• 30 to 23 December: de Filharmonie with Dutch Chamber Choir, Anna Korondi, soprano, Jan Kobow, tenor, conductor: Philippe Herreweghe, Weihnachtsoratorium JS Bach, De Singel, Antwerp; info: www.desingel.be

• 20 to 23 December: de Filharmonie with Dutch Chamber Choir, Anna Korondi, soprano, Jan Kobow, tenor, conductor: Philippe Herreweghe, Weihnachtsoratorium JS Bach, De Singel, Antwerp; info: www.desingel.be

• 30 to 23 December: de Filharmonie with Dutch Chamber Choir, Anna Korondi, soprano, Jan Kobow, tenor, conductor: Philippe Herreweghe, Weihnachtsoratorium JS Bach, De Singel, Antwerp; info: www.desingel.be

EXPO

• From 5 February onwards: The memory of Congo, the colonial period, exhibition, Museum for Central Africa (Tervuren); info: www.175-25.be

• Until 31 January: Master pieces from the Dutch treasure room, KMSK, Antwerp; info: www.kmsk.be

• 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 23 December: The art nouveau front as a complete work of art, Museum for Architecture, Brussels; info: 02/642.24.75

• Until 23 December: Between Photo and Film, exhibition, KMKG, Cinquantenaire, Brussels; info: www.kmkkg.be

• Until 31 December: Art nouveau and Design 1870-1920, Royal Museum for Art and History, Cinquantenaire, Brussels; info: 02/741.72.11 www.kmkkg.be

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