Catholic education system wants to make schools’ opinion enforceable in study choice

Mieke Van Hecke, senior female executive at the Flemish Secretariat for Catholic Education, wants parents to be given less freedom in their children’s choice of study. She feels that schools should be given the right to refuse children access to branches of study which it is certain they will not cope with. The figures speak for themselves. Last year 17,500 children changed school or subject in the middle of the school year, mostly because the choice of subject was above their heads. Many of these pupils thereby end up in the classic ‘waterfall’ and drop from General Secondary Education (ASO) to Technical Secondary Education (TSO) or Vocational Training (BSO). Van Hecke therefore wants to be able to make the advice given by teachers and the Centre for Student Guidance to parents enforceable. Education Minister Frank Vandenbroucke (SP.A) has refrained from commenting. His predecessor Marleen Vanderpoorten (VLD) is against the idea (FF).

JAN SEGERS
Het Laatste Nieuws • 3 February

‘Unfortunately parents stubbornly refuse to see that ASO, TSO and BSO are choices of equal value. There’s still not been any change of mentality’. And so Mieke Van Hecke wants schools, ‘exceptionally and only in clear cases’, to be given the right to keep children from opting for a subject or branch of study in which their chance of success is ‘almost zero’. If all objective data indicate that such a choice is doomed to failure, why should the school have to permit such a choice? Or take a typical ‘waterfall’ example of an ASO pupil who, in the last grade (5th year of secondary school), transfers to a highly technological, highly specialised TSO course. What is the point of beginning if that pupil does not have any of the prior knowledge and skill? Marleen Vanderpoorten does not agree. ‘Schools have to guide their pupils by giving them expert advice, but should not refuse or oblige them. Pupils should keep their freedom to make their own choice. Often their motivation is greater if they follow the course or subject that really interests them’. Vanderpoorten also points to another risk: ‘Who guarantees that every school will act in good faith and will not make improper use of such a right of refusal in order to turn away undesirable pupils and only keep on an elite?’

INTRODUCTION

The King’s New Year’s speech led to commotion this week in Flanders. The King warned of veiled separatism and sub-nationalism, and brought to the attention of Flemings the fact that a possible split of the country could prove costly for the wealthy region as well, i.e. Flanders. The speech clearly went down none too well not only with the Flemish nationalist parties such as Spirit, N-VA and Vlaams Belang, but also with the Christian-Democrats of the CD&V. After all, CD&V is demanding a new round in the state reform in 2007 and has already made some strong comments about that. It is boldly refusing to enter a new federal gov- ernment if there are no negotiations on further regionalisation. Flemish CD&V MP Eric Van Rompuy thinks that the King is lumping together Flemish demands in the same pile and pushing his party into the Vlaams Belang camp. He explained that his party only wanted Flanders and Wallonia to be able to deal with their labour markets in their own way.

In the Flemish Parliament, where annoyance at the speech found an escape valve the following day during question time, Minister-President Leterme (CD&V) poured oil on troubled waters, saying that the King did not play any role in the Flemish institutions and that his government would continue to strive towards greater autonomy in tax and socio-economic matters. He also assured that Wallonia could sleep easy, since financial solidarity (the transfers of funds) with Wallonia was not being touched. According to De Morgen (1 February), many saw Guy Verhofstadt’s hand in the King’s address. As federal Prime Minister, he has to ‘cover’ every speech made by the King. Suddenly, they suspect, Verhofstadt no longer felt like a new round of state reform and had the King deliver that message. The next day the Prime Minister quashed all doubts. It was indeed the palace that had written the speech and he was determined in 2007 to work out a solution for Brussels-Halle-Vilvoorde and to regulate the transfer of powers to the regions. As in every round surrounding the royal family, on this occasion voices were again heard in favour of the King’s role being limited, along the lines of the Swedish model, to that of purely ceremonial duties. Appointing or dismissing ministers, commandeurship of the army, the weekly talks with the Prime Minister or the signing of laws are no longer included in that scenario. That standpoint was defended, for example, by N-VA chairman Bart Dewever. But the consti- tution has to be amended for that limitation of the royal duties, and therefore a number of articles of the constitution have to be declared liable for review at the end of the current legislature. On Wednesday Het Nieuwsblad claimed that there was reportedly a con- sensus on this among prominent Flemish politicians and in the PS. This was quickly denied the following day by the Prime Minister (VLD), Walloon Minister-President Di Rupo (PS) and Deputy Prime Minister Freya Vanden Bossche (SP.A).

Frank Vandecasteeve | editor in chief
Cause of dioxin contamination traced

Last week a case of dioxin contamination came to light in the Dutch animal feed company Boumans. The contamination originated from fat supplied from Belgium, more specifically from Profat in Deinze, which had in turn purchased the fat from gelatine producer PB Gelatins in Vilvoorde. It later emerged that the contaminated fat was not only supplied to the Netherlands but also to two Belgian animal feed companies. As a precautionary measure, 96 poultry and pig farms that had received contaminated feed were immediately embargoed, and the Federal Food Agency began systematic checks at other animal feed companies. A little later it transpired that two more animal feed companies had received contaminated fat. The contamination occurred between 15 November and 15 December last year. On 30 January, 330 more pig and poultry farms were embargoed. Embargoed farms are provisionally not allowed to slaughter their animals. That same day the Federal Food Agency (FAVV) was also able to ascertain that the source of the contamination was located at PB Gelatins. It turned out to be the hydrochloric acid used to collect the fat from the pig bone. The hydrochloric acid was produced at the listed group Tessenderlo Chemie, PB Gelatins’ parent company. Two defective filters, that purge the raw material of dioxins, had apparently malfunctioned between 6 and 28 October when hydrochloric acid was being produced. Tessenderlo Chemie admits the error. The animal feed companies, grouped together in the association Bemefa, are tired of contaminated raw materials constantly being discovered, and are considering a claim for damages. For the time being there is no public health risk, the Food Agency announced. No feed is being withdrawn from the shelves, either (FF).

GERDA ACKAERT • DE TIJD • 31 JANUARY

The lengthy malfunction of the filter system raises questions. How can a filter malfunction in a large industrial group go unnoticed for three weeks? ‘We are legally obliged to carry out checks for PCBs (polychlorobiphenyl) in the food chain. Up until now it was assumed that dioxins were always found in the presence of PCBs. Our checks have shown that there were no PCBs. So we had no reason to doubt the operation of the filters, which are designed to remove dioxin from the hydrochloric acid’, says Dusar. This assertion is confirmed externally. ‘After the dioxin crisis in 1999 there was agreement that the best thing was to check for PCBs. After all, it was assumed that PCBs mostly appeared in conjunction with dioxins. Testing for PCBs is quicker and cheaper than testing for dioxins’, says Pascal Houbaert, spokesman for the Federal Food Agency.

Dusar was yesterday unable to say whether Tessenderlo was covered against possible claims for damages. ‘It was only yesterday that the problem with the filter installation was ascertained. We have reported the problem to the insurance company and they’re looking into whether we are insured’. Tessenderlo Chemie is an industrial group active in 21 countries and with 8,300 employees. The chemicals division is one of the three divisions in the group, which has 1,350 members of staff in our country. Two hundred and twenty people are employed at the subsidiary company PB Gelatins. WWW.AFSCA.BE WWW.TESSENDERLOCHEMIE.BE

King Albert warns against separatism

The traditional New Year’s reception for the ‘authorities of the country’ at the Royal Palace is usually a ceremoni- al society event. On Tuesday things were rather different. In his address King Albert II warned against ‘the development of a sub-nationalism’ and ‘open and veiled separatism’, for the first time he brought up ‘the tensions between the regions’, ‘the difference in well-being and in policy’ and the ‘transfers of funds between the regions’. His warning was clearly directed at Flanders (FF).

PETER VANDEMEERSCH • DE STANDAARD • 1 FEBRUARY

In a warning he added that: ‘Divisions and splits usually turn out to be costly for all parties concerned, regardless of whether they are currently rich or not very well off. The human cost price should certainly not be forgotten either. Underestimating it would be a grave error. People should not nurture any illusions in any of these areas’. A little later there followed an almost desperate plea: ‘In the name of peace, let us not draw over-hasty conclusions based on certain economic differences. Let us […] turn our assets to best account. I am thinking, for example, of the international role of Brussels and of our entire country which could be jeopardised by an anachronistic and disastrous separatism’. The sharp words from the king, which were greeted with lengthy applause, were widely echoed by the public. Many felt that it was ‘right’ that the kind should speak out in such terms. Others, who did not wish to be named, said that they were ‘not amused’ by the political message. In particular the word ‘veiled’ (séparatisme feutré in the French) was seen by some as a rejection of further state reform. The king’s speech is also seen as a reply from the royal house to the report by the so-called ‘Warande group’. At the end of last year this group, under the leadership of Remi Vermeiren, former CEO of the KBC, wrote a ‘Manifest for an independent Flanders in Europe’. In it the think-tank came to the conclusion that Belgium no longer had any added value for Flanders. The king’s speech is written at the Royal Palace is usually a ceremoni- al society event. On Tuesday things were rather different. In his address King Albert II warned against ‘the development of a sub-nationalism’ and ‘open and veiled separatism’, for the first time he brought up ‘the tensions between the regions’, ‘the difference in well-being and in policy’ and the ‘transfers of funds between the regions’. His warning was clearly directed at Flanders (FF).

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PETER VANDEMEERSCH • DE STANDAARD • 1 FEBRUARY

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A ‘Flemish Constitution’ is being worked on

Each party emphasises different matters in its own version. The idea is that a ‘constitution’ should be distilled from the various versions

By the summer the Flemish majority parties want to produce a constitution of their own, or to put it more accurately: a foundational decree, since the Flemish Community/Region does not as yet have constitutional competence (although the possibility of this changing in the future cannot be ruled out). A constitutional competence does not have to be a threat to the unity of Belgium, as the Speaker of the Flemish Parliament Norbert De Batselier (SPA) had earlier said in conciliatory terms. The German Länder, the Swiss federated regions and the states in the USA already have that competence, and those countries have not disintegrated (De Standaard, 30 January).

It was De Batselier who gave the initial impetus to such a foundational decree. In 2002 he wrote his ‘Charter for Flanders’, a revised version of which he presented at the end of last year. In the mean time the Liberals have prepared their own proposal and on 28 January the alliance partners CD&V and N-VA finally announced at their Third Flemish Conference that they were writing their own version. Each party emphasises different matters in its own version. The idea is that a ‘constitution’ should ‘confirm and firmly establish the specific character of Flanders’. According to De Batselier himself it should be a mission statement, indicating the direction in which Flanders should evolve. The idea is that a ‘constitution’ should be distilled from the various versions by this summer. Then Speaker De Batselier can table it himself, before he passes on the torch, after 10 years, to his Liberal successor (FF).

Opinion

ANN PEUTEMAN • KNACK • 1 FEBRUARY

Last month Norbert De Batselier (SPA) came up with an updated version of his Charter for Flanders from 2002. A praiseworthy attempt, to be sure, but the text still shows striking similarities with the SPA’s party programme and is even adorned with some of alliance partner Spirit’s pet subjects. Apart from that, there’s something to suit everyone: a reference to the good administration that CD&V wants to make its trademark, and also a few unsolicited proposals from the VLD. But neither the VLD nor CD&V and N-VA are planning to model a constitution on the basis of this working document.

The Liberals promptly produced their own version, and alliance partners N-VA and CD&V announced last weekend that they, too, were writing an alternative version. They want a modern, comprehensible text which would not immediately have to be adapted if Flanders were accorded additional competencies in the near future, and which could grow into a genuine constitution - for constitutional autonomy will certainly be thrown onto the table at the community round in 2007.

Now that everyone has justified their positions in detail, the Flemish Constitutional parliamentary committee, under the chairmanship of De Batselier, can really get to work. Or perhaps not, since first there will be a month of hearings. After that it will be up to the committee members to distil a text from all the proposals, amendments and hobbyhorses. This will preferably be done before the summer, so that De Batselier can still chalk up the so-called constitution to his own account - something he would not be begrudged, after his more than respectable ten-year stint as Speaker of Parliament. And the ball is in his court: if De Batselier wants a quick result, he will have to let go of his own charter more than he would like.
The head of the Belgian National Security Service Koen Dassen is stepping down. In a joint announcement, Interior Minister Patrick Dewael (VLD) and Justice Minister Laurette Onkelinx (PS) reported that Dassen was tendering ‘honourable resignation’. At Dewael’s request he is exchanging his job for the post of ‘special expert for European and international aspects of the security and immigration policy’.

The resignation came after consultations between Prime Minister Verhofstadt (VLD) and his Deputy Prime Ministers Onkelinx and Dewael. Dassen failed to report information to Onkelinx relating to the delivery, in November 2004, of an isostatic press by the firm Epsi (Engineered Pressure System International) from Temse (East Flanders) to Iran. The delivery allegedly contravened the international rules providing for a nuclear and military embargo against Iran. An isostatic press could be used for the manufacture of nuclear weapons, according to a warning from the US intelligence service CIA, which allegedly urged the National Security Service to prevent the shipment of the press. A little later the CIA also warned the Belgian customs departments, but the press was transported via a customs office that is scarcely subject to any checks, and the press thus ended up in Iran without any problems. Once there, it was set up at Iran Aircraft Industries, where it is to be used in the treatment of aircraft parts to prevent metal fatigue. In De Standaard Epsi’s business manager claims that the press is totally unsuitable for nuclear purposes. A report of an investigation by Committee I, presented to the Senate on 31 January, confirms that errors were made or obstructive measures taken [FF].

FILIP VERHOEST
DE STANDAARD • 1 FEBRUARY

The senators and Committee I find it incomprehensible that the National Security Service did not set up any investigation in the wake of the specific information it received from the US intelligence services. The National Security Service also never informed the CIA of the measures it had taken. That does not create a good impression of professionalism.

Furthermore, when the Senate started an investigation, the head of the National Security Service, Koen Dassen, refused to allow the memo that the Americans had sent to be inspected. According to Dassen, this document fell under the rule of confidentiality that applies between intelligence services, although the Americans expressly asked for the Belgian government to be kept informed.

Eventually the Senate had the document confiscated. That has never happened before. The senators point out that the National Security Service behaves like ‘a state within the state’. But the worst thing is that Dassen lied to the Justice Minister, Laurette Onkelinx (PS), when she asked the National Security Service whether, in the autumn of 2004, the service had been aware of an imminent suspected shipment to Iran. The National Security Service said that it had no such information. Since 2001 the National Security Service has paid too much attention to the fight against terrorism, and controls of exports of nuclear material have been inadequate. The cooperation between the National Security Service and the customs services could be a lot better. The only positive note is that Parliament’s monitoring of the intelligence services has revealed the truth. The question remains why Dassen misinformed the minister. Out of incompetence, to cover errors made by his department, or for some other reason?

WWW.SENATE.BE

Survey on future royal family

A survey commissioned by het Nieuwsblad/Het Volk carried out among 1,144 Belgians on 1 February, the day after the king’s controversial speech, reveals that 56% of Flemings, 58% of people living in Brussels and 60% of Walloons still choose a king as their head of state. A majority of Flemings, Bruxellois and Walloons also feel that the next king, Philippe, should be given the same competencies as his father. However, a small majority of Flemings (53%) feel that the competencies of the Regions of Flanders and Wallonia should be increased. A majority of Walloons (61%) and people from Brussels (55%) are opposed to that.

| Do you prefer a King, an elected president or none of both in Belgium? |
|-----------------------------|-----------------|----------|
| **KING**                   |                 |          |
| BELGIUM                    | 60%             |          |
| FLANDERS                   | 56%             |          |
| WALLONIA                   | 68%             |          |
| BRUSSELS                   | 58%             |          |
| **PRESIDENT**              |                 |          |
| BELGIUM                    | 26%             |          |
| FLANDERS                   | 27%             |          |
| WALLONIA                   | 33%             |          |
| BRUSSELS                   | 31%             |          |
| **NONE OF BOTH**           |                 |          |
| BELGIUM                    | 10%             |          |
| FLANDERS                   | 12%             |          |
| WALLONIA                   | 5%              |          |
| BRUSSELS                   | 9%              |          |

SOURCE: HET NIEUWSBLAD

| Should the competencies of Flanders and Wallonia be increased? |
|-----------------------------|-----------------|----------|
| **YES**                     |                 |          |
| BELGIUM                     | 42%             |          |
| FLANDERS                    | 53%             |          |
| WALLONIA                    | 25%             |          |
| BRUSSELS                    | 27%             |          |
| **NO**                      |                 |          |
| BELGIUM                     | 42%             |          |
| FLANDERS                    | 30%             |          |
| WALLONIA                    | 61%             |          |
| BRUSSELS                    | 55%             |          |
| **DOESN’T KNOW**            |                 |          |
| BELGIUM                     | 16%             |          |
| FLANDERS                    | 25%             |          |
| WALLONIA                    | 17%             |          |
| BRUSSELS                    | 14%             |          |

SOURCE: HET NIEUWSBLAD
A week ago the Bishop of Antwerp Paul Vanden Berghe himself behind the demands made by the ‘HOP’ campaign (from the Dutch words for ‘Hope for Papers’) in favour of people without papers. As a bishop, Christian and citizen, he advocates a warm society and speaks in defence of people without papers who integrate into society. According to the bishop, they function perfectly well in our society and sending them back would be sending out the wrong signal. The bishop claims that migration is a right, and thereby took aim at the policy pursued by Interior Minister Patrick Dewael (VLD). In so saying, the bishop is defending not only a large number of priests, but also support committees at schools where children of illegal aliens attend classes. They provide asylum-seekers with shelter or material support. Dewael had previously described as punishable certain types of help given to illegal aliens. The minister defends his policy in an open letter to the bishop in De Morgen (FF).

LIESBETH VAN IMPE • DE MORGEN
30 JANUARY

Dewael is now replying to the bishop in a letter, in which he defends his own policy. ‘The law states that people who request asylum here for economic or any other reasons and are refused, must leave the country. Believe me, Monsignor, this is not a pleasant task. But as Interior Minister, it is my duty to comply with the law’. The demand for people without papers to be given amnesty puts Dewael ‘in a moral dilemma’. ‘Can I reward people who for years have consciously broken the law by residing here illegally, whilst people who leave voluntarily and spontaneously are in fact punished by that? Should I, as you suggest, regularise the situation of people for whom a neighbourhood committee is campaigning, and quietly deport those who have no support group? Isn’t that rather unfair? Isn’t that - to some extent - playing at God?’ Dewael also feels that a blanket regularisation for people without papers is not a possibility. After all, that would lead to a ‘tidal wave’, which would cause our social security system to ‘collapse’ and would be grist to the mill for the Vlaams Belang (the far right party, ed.). ‘Then a certain political party which does not excel at Christian charity but lives off hate and rejection of ‘others’, would secure the majority hands down. Then our society would become intolerable’. Dewael is also calling on the bishop to support his call for better north-south relations and less economic protectionism.

WWW.IBZ.FGOV.BE

VLD advocates more flexible labour model

THOSE WHO WORK FOUR-FIFTHS TIME WOULD BE ABLE TO HAVE THE FREE DAYS THEY HAVE SAVED UP COINCIDE WITH THE SCHOOL HOLIDAYS

ANJA OTTE • DE STANDAARD • 28 JANUARY

At Daikin employees who are on four-fifths working time or half time are expected on the work floor every day of the week. However, they have all school holidays off. During the course of the year as soon as they have reached the stipulated number of working hours - roughly in September or October - they get the rest of the year off. Daikin absorbs the periods with fewer staff with people aged over fifty. ‘Young temps were demotivated because these periods did not lead to a permanent position’, said Daikin manager Salambier. VLD chairman Bart Somers regards Daikin as an example of an innovative approach to labour law. He is also thinking of the possibility of exchanging the end-of-year bonus for extra holiday days. He also has a flexible alternative for student jobs - which are at present limited to 23 days in the summer months and 23 outside that period. His idea is a package of 400 hours that can be used up freely. The idea behind the proposals is that if we want to crank up the level of activity, we have to make things easier for the hard-working Fleming. For example, the situation in which women still always earn less than men cannot be tolerated. Hence the proposal to share pension rights between two partners if one of them starts to work less. For the VLD, employees should be able to become their own career managers. Job security is out, work security should come in its place. Also striking was the plea made by Jong VLD [VLD’s youth branch] for unemployment benefit to be increased, for the recipient’s readiness to work to be tested, and for the benefit to be limited in time. In the first year an unemployed person keeps 80% of his income, and after two years the figure is still 60%. After three years the unemployed person relies on subsistence benefit.

WWW.VLD.BE

focus on flanders • 28 January - 3 February 2006 • Number 5
Belgium is opting for business approach in Mittal Steel bid for Arcelor

Belgium is therefore not joining the front formed by France and Luxembourg rejecting the takeover bid

On 27 January the Anglo-Indian metal company Mittal, the largest in the world, made a hostile bid of EUR 18.6 billion for Arcelor, number two in the steel production sector. If the merger comes off, it will create the largest steel company in the world, accounting for 10% of world steel production. Arcelor has a market value of EUR 14.2 billion, according to De Tijd, and was created from the merger of the Luxembourg company Arbed, the French company Usinor and the Spanish company Aceralía. The company employs 12,500 people in Belgium: at Sidmar (Ghent) and at Cockerill Sambre (Liège) and Carinox and Industeel (Charleroi).

The Indian magnate Lakshmi Mittal, owner of Mittal Steel, informed Prime Minister Verhofstadt (VLD) of his offer and stressed that he would assume all obligations to which Arcelor had in the meantime committed itself for its Belgian establishments. At an international meeting of the Arcelor works council, the trade unions already rejected the offer and called on the authorities to do the same. Wallonia (2.4%), Spain (3%) and Luxembourg (5.6%) still have a shareholding in Arcelor, whereas Flanders sold its stake. The steel company is economically important for Luxembourg and Wallonia in particular. In Wallonia Arcelor is the largest employer, whilst in Luxembourg the steel sector is the only industrial sector of any importance.

A little later the Arcelor board of directors also rejected the offer made by Mittal Steel, calling on the Arcelor shareholders not to offer their shares for sale. Managing Director Guy Dollé can for the moment do little more than launch stinging verbal attacks on Mittal from Paris. A genuine financial defensive strategy is out of the question, concludes De Tijd (31 January). Arcelor has spent billions in recent years on acquisitions, which means that the war chest is now empty.

On Monday 30 January Lakshmi Mittal started his charm offensive. In Luxembourg he met with Prime Minister Juncker. He went to Paris for talks with President Chirac and Prime Minister de Villepin. He promised that the takeover would not cause any job losses and said that he was prepared to move his head office from Rotterdam to Luxembourg. The Belgian government thinks there is little point in engaging in a fight for Arcelor's shareholding. All authorities together hold 11% of the shares, with in excess of 80% of the shares spread across the stock market (FF).

Opinion

GUY VANDEN BROEK • DE TIJD • 31 JANUARY

In an initial reaction analysts said that the bid made economic sense on account of the possibilities for synergies between the two companies. But a multinational like Arcelor with deep roots in France, Belgium, Luxembourg and Spain, is more than just steel. The company represents Western European industrial culture and power on a world scale. The idea of handing over that power just like that to an Indian who has got rich quick goes down none too well in the drawing rooms of Paris and Luxembourg.

If the French political establishment fully supports the ‘no’ voiced by Arcelor’s senior management, it will be very difficult for Mittal to haul in the loot. Last year French policy was obstructive when the American group PepsiCo held talks on a takeover bid for the French food group Danone. France raises its hackles when the core of its industrial heritage is touched. For Luxembourg and Wallonia, Arcelor is actually even more important. It will not be difficult for Arcelor’s senior management, and certainly not for the politicians in Paris, Luxembourg and Brussels, to find arguments for thwarting Mittal’s bid. What is involved is the shifting of decision-making power to another continent, with all the possible consequences that that could have for local employment and investment policy. However, at the same time, as shareholders in Arcelor, they are being offered the prospect of a splendid capital gain. Arcelor’s major and political shareholders are faced with a dilemma: power or money. It seems logical that they will opt for power. Steel as a raw material for car manufacturing and the defence industry, to name but two sectors, is too important throughout Western Europe for it to be transferred into foreign hands without further ado.

WWW.ARCELOR.BE
WWW.SIDMAR.BE

Verhofstadt, Leterme and Di Rupo to hold talks with Mittal

On Monday 6 February Prime Minister Verhofstadt will hold talks with Lakshmi Mittal, the managing director of Mittal Steel, which is making a hostile bid for Arcelor. The Flemish and Walloon Minister-Presidents Leterme and Di Rupo will be attending the talks. Verhofstadt, Leterme and Di Rupo are opting for a business approach. First of all they want guarantees for employment, investments and the commitments already made by Arcelor’s Belgian establishments. Belgium is therefore not joining the front formed by France and Luxembourg rejecting the takeover bid. A meeting with Luxembourg’s Prime Minister Juncker did not change the Belgian position, either. It was merely agreed that a merchant bank would look into Mittal’s bid (De Tijd, 2 February).
Cargill, Bioro and Vanden Avenne build biodiesel plant

The American food group Cargill and the Flemish companies Vanden Avenne and Bioro are together investing EUR 62 million in a biodiesel plant in the port of Ghent. The plant can produce 200,000 tons of biodiesel a year. Cargill made its biodiesel plans known during Prime Minister Verhovestadt’s (VLD) roadshow in the USA. At the time there was talk of an investment of USD 75 million. According to De Standaard, that corresponds to the total costs of the biodiesel project in the port of Ghent. Apart from in the plant, major investments are also being made in the adaptation of existing transhipment installations at the Rodenhuizen dock (FF).

PASCAL SERTYN
DE STANDAARD • 28 JANUARY

The Rodenhuize dock could best be rechristened the Biodiesel dock. In the future various companies will be deployed at the dock in the production of the environmentally friendly fuel. The grain transhipment company Euro-Silo is responsible for the delivery of the raw materials, chiefly rape-seed. Euro-Silo is owned by Vanden Avenne and Cargill. Cargill itself is pumping EUR 37 million into the switch-over of its current oil press-house from soya to rape-seed and the building of a refining plant for the production of vegetable oils. The investment means that the jobs of the 75 employees of the oil press-house are guaranteed.

There is also already an agreement with the transhipment company Oiltanking that runs a tank plant in the Rodenhuize dock. The biodiesel is to be stored in the tanks. The Port of Ghent is also to benefit from the investment, since five hundred extra dockworkers will be needed for the transshipment of raw materials.

ESCO has proclaimed ‘masterworks’ in the last few years. In the last round, this world renown was conferred upon the giants of Belgium and Northern France, among others. Previously the carnival at Binche had been honoured. But should UNESCO now carry on proclaiming ‘masterworks’ and thereby, in particular, support tourism? Another possibility is that the various countries play the nationalistic card and harness their popular culture to the cart of their national identity. But Flanders in particular wants to go in another direction with popular culture, towards cultural diversity and an alternative globalisation. Care for heritage should help local culture. For that, Western countries should cooperate with the South. UNESCO should not reward a list of chart-toppers, but support exemplary projects. ‘We’ve been talking about globalisation for so long. Now we have a chance to help influence the discourse’, says Marc Jacobs, manager of the Flemish Centre for Popular Culture, which also negotiates in UNESCO.

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Flanders and Wallonia ratify convention on popular culture

After the French-speaking Community, the Flemish Parliament has now also ratified a UNESCO convention on popular culture. UNESCO (the UN’s education, science and culture organisation) drew up the convention on ‘intangible heritage’ (dances, processions, folklore, etc.) in 2003. Thirty countries have already adopted it. The speed of ratification in our country represents a break with a trend, since Belgium only adopted a previous convention on tangible heritage (monuments and landscapes) after 24 years. That not only cost Belgium considerable influence at UNESCO, but it also meant that, for example, Beguine convents and belfries were only recognised from 1995 onwards. Now, however, Flanders and Wallonia want to get to work quickly.

If the Council of State approves the ratifications by the Communities, Belgium can still make the deadline of 30 March and has a chance of being included in the UNESCO committee that has to work out the specific terms of the convention (FF).

KAREL VERHOEVEN
DE STANDAARD • 2 FEBRUARY

What is it actually about? Third World countries in particular were annoyed in the 1990s by the UNESCO’s Western short-sightedness. The UNESCO was making huge efforts for old and threatened monuments, but countries like Japan and entire continents such as Africa and South America have few precious stone monuments. The map therefore took on a very European feel. Third World countries argued that support should also be given to less tangible heritage, such as languages, dances, rituals, forms of theatre or processions. That finally happened in 2003. To promote this new convention, the UN-
CULTURE

DIARY

MUSIC, DANCE, THEATRE

• 5 to 23 February: Die Lustige Witwe by Franz Lehar, Michel Tilkin, conductor and Lee Blakeley, director, Flanders Opera, Ghent; info: www.vlaamsopera.be
• 6 and 7 February: Meg Stuart/damaged goods – Auf den Tisch!, dance, De Vooruit, Ghent; info: www.vooruit.be 09/267.28.28
• 7 February: M. Ravel, De Filharmonie, Antwerp, Ghent; info: www.filharmonie.be

EXPO

• 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 30 April: Pain, exhibition, Museum Ghislain, Gent; www.museumghislain.be

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