



BELGA

A notice in Zaventem town hall requests visitors to talk to employees in Dutch only. Peter Philp called them in English to find out more

At the end of last month, Zaventem municipality issued a request that all non-Dutch speakers coming to the town hall should in future bring an interpreter with them if they are unable to converse in Dutch. A notice in Dutch, French, English, German, Spanish and Arabic, signed by Burgomaster Francis Vermieren and Town Clerk Wim de Bruyn, now appears at each desk inside the town hall alerting visitors to this requirement.

"The municipality of Zaventem is located in the Dutch-speaking part of Belgium. The laws and decrees formally forbid employees to speak any other language but Dutch with the administrated. If you are don't speak Dutch well enough, we kindly request that you bring an interpreter."

The measure was announced by Councillor Eric Van Rompuy. "[The policy confirms] the monolingual Dutch-speaking character of our municipality and clarifies how the municipality's civil servants have to deal with non-Dutch-speakers."

Vermeiren was unavailable for comment, but de Bruyn told *The Bulletin* that the measure was mainly aimed at day-to-day dealings in the Town Hall and was implemented to avoid confusion. "Legally-speaking, our people are not qualified [to speak other languages]. The language legislation dates from 1966. We just execute it now because we have so many problems with angry people coming to our offices demanding that our employees speak their language."

Asked if this measure was a bit extreme and maybe hurting business de Bruyn said: "For foreigners, it may seem a bit extreme. But I don't think it's hurting business. Privately, investors can speak what they wish. But when you come into contact with the authorities, everything must be in Dutch."

The *Bulletin* followed up this piece of news by calling two airports, one in the Netherlands, the other in Zaventem, Belgium, to find out how the municipal authorities there dealt with enquiries in English. Here are extracts of the conversations verbatim:

**Haarlemmermeer
Town Hall (near
Amsterdam Airport),
The Netherlands**

Haarlemmermeer:
Goede middag.
Gemeente
Haarlemmermeer.

The Bulletin: Hello. Do you speak English?

H: Yes.

TB: Thank you. I'm calling from England and I'm looking to set up an import-export business near the airport in your area and I was just making some calls to find out about the procedures. Do you know anyone who can help me?

H: No. From Monday to Friday at nine o'clock in the morning until one o'clock and they can

give you information.

TB: OK. Thank you.

H: You're welcome. But have to ask for, I shall give you the name, it is Mister Overbeek and the department is called CBI.

TB: CBI?

H: Yes sir.

TB: Do you know if Mister Overbeek speaks English?

H: Yes, he speaks English [laughs].

TB: Fantastic. I don't speak Dutch you see.

H: OK.

TB: Thank you very much.

H: OK, you're welcome.

**Zaventem Town Hall
(near Brussels Airport)**

Zaventem: Goede middag. Gemeente Zaventem.

TB: Hello. Do you speak English?

Z: [In English]. No sir

TB: No? Is there anyone in your office who can sp...

Z: We not may talk any other language but Dutch.

TB: OK. I'm calling from England and I'm looking to speak to someone about setting up a company in your area. For permits and so on.

Z: A building permit?

TB: Yes, well, the necessary permits I need to set up...

Z: That's our service of urbanisation, but they talk *only* in Dutch, sir.

TB: Errm. OK. I'm sorry, I don't...

Z: Is it possible to have an interpreter?

TB: I'm in England right now I don't know where

to find someone who speaks Dutch. Errrr. French perhaps?

Z: No, it's only Dutch.

TB: OK. I don't quite know what to do. You can't find anybody who speaks a bit of English?

Z: But we, errr, we don't may talk in English sir, because Zaventem is only Dutch-speaking.

TB: And... OK. I want to.. I don't know what..

OK. How do I set up a business in Zaventem?

Z: You have to find a translator or interpreter who can talk in English to you and Dutch to us and then the service will give you the information.

TB: OK. It sounds very difficult. Surely it's...

Z: Ja, I know it's difficult, but that's the law here.

TB: OK. So maybe I should look elsewhere.

Z: And which information do you want? Is it a building permit or a...

TB: Well, I'm considering starting an import-export business and I want to be close to an airport and I understand there's an airport in your municipality?

Z: Yes.

TB: And I'm investigating to see what sort of permits I need or difficulties I might have.

Z: Yes I know, but... I will put you through to the service, but they won't talk English. One moment please.

TB: OK thank you.

Ringing

Z: Met *****

TB: Yes, hello. Do you speak English?

Z: Mmmm, nee maar zeg het maar in het Engels en ik antwoord in het Nederlands.

TB: I'm sorry, I don't understand. I'm calling from England to find

out what sort of permits and stuff I need to set up a business in your commune. Can anyone speak English?

Z: [in English] Normally we are not allowed to speak another language other than Flemish, but tell me what you want.

TB: I'm considering where to set up my import-export business and I would like to be near an airport. I'm just wondering what sort of permits or who I need to talk to.

Z: Yes, OK. What we want to know is first, have you got a location or not?

TB: I don't have anything yet. This is one of my first phone calls.

Z: Aha, yeah OK. Then it's very difficult to help you for us, but we have another organisation who can help you better than we can. Do you have a moment? [wait] It is called VLAO.

TB: And that's a website I can find.

Z: Yes. It's www.vlao.be. Because Zaventem is located in the province of Vlaams Brabant. V-L-A-A-M-S-B-R-A-B-A-N-T.

TB: OK, good. So in the future if I need to call back, can I ask for you?

Z: You can ask for me or if you have someone who can translate. Officially, we are not allowed to speak... only in Flemish.

TB: Am I going to have to hire someone if I...

Z: If you come here at Zaventem, it's better to have someone who can translate. But on the telephone it's no problem. I will respond to you in English.

TB: Good stuff, thank you.

The golden oldie days

Belgium's footballers may have battled to hold their own at the Beijing Olympics this week, but their predecessors did better at the Antwerp Games in 1920: they took gold, and became effective world champions, as Leo Cendrowicz reveals

In 1920, a full decade before the World Cup was created, but more than half a century after the laws of the game were first codified, Belgium claimed the greatest prize football could then offer: Olympic gold.

For many, it was the highlight of the 1920 Antwerp Olympics. Some would grumble that it was an unconvincing victory: Belgium's opponents in the final, Czechoslovakia stormed off the pitch after just 39 minutes, in protest at the British referee. But it was certainly satisfying. It was "an orgiastic catharsis," according to Roland Renson, author of *The Reborn Games*.

"Fans stormed the pitch and carried the team out on their shoulders. It was the first moment of collective glory for Belgium after World War One," he says.

Football was one of the rare events that the otherwise indifferent Belgians were ready to follow. Other sports at the Olympics – from running and swimming to shooting and tug-of-war – were seen as elitist distractions from the more proletarian business of post-war rebuilding. But Renson says the Belgian crowds identified with the team, many of whom had played together during the war in matches behind the trenches. Their nickname reflected their origins: the Front Wanderers.

The Belgian side was coached by the flamboyant and multitalented Raoul Daufresne de la Chevalerie, a former Cercle Brugge player. He also won a bronze medal in hockey at the same Antwerp Olympics, and competed in the tennis tournament. Equally, the team featured Louis Van Hege, who would go on to compete in the two-man bobsleigh at the 1932 Winter Olympics, finishing ninth.



Gold medal: Belgian team in Antwerp in 1920

There were 14 teams vying for gold, although Belgium – as host – and France were given byes to hop straight into the quarter-finals. Four venues were used over the five days of the tournament: Antwerp's newly built Olympic stadium, the Bosuilstadion across town, La Gantoise in Ghent, and Union Saint-Gilloise's La Butte in Brussels.

The first round saw a shock 3-1 defeat of Great Britain by Norway, and – in what would become a familiar routine for vanquished British sides – an attempt to belittle their victorious opponents as cheats (in this case, Norway, who were amateur, were accused of being 'professionals').

The first day also saw two high scoring games: Czechoslovakia's spectacular 7-0 crushing of Yugoslavia and Sweden's 9-0 pulverizing of Greece. Crowds for the six first round games on August 28 – all on the same day – ranged from 600 to 5,000. But the stands started to fill at the quarter-finals, all the following day, with 18,000 watching Belgium's 2-1 defeat of Spain. And on August 31, 22,000 saw Belgium beat the Netherlands 2-0 in the semi-finals.

The September 2 final remains the only occasion an international final has been abandoned. Czechoslovakia – who had defeated France in the semi-finals – had been losing 2-0 at the time. But they claimed the 72-year-old referee John Lewis – and his two fellow British linesmen – had been influenced by the surging 35,000 home crowd, "whose provocative presence meant our players were unable to play their normal game". Lewis may have been harsh, but impartial observers had little doubt that the Belgians deserved their victory.

Although these days it is the world's most popular sport, football usually takes a back seat at the Olympics. Football clubs argue that it is a badly timed tournament.

Today it seems almost absurd to imagine Belgium winning the World Cup: the Red Devils didn't even qualify for the last tournament in Germany two years ago, and their best ever result was a semi-final in 1986. But as the Antwerp Olympics showed, the Belgians have been world champions, even if the memories of that gold have faded.