
ERIK
SAELENS
BRAND
ED
THE INSIDE STORY OF A
GAME-CHANGING BELGIAN
ELECTION CAMPAIGN



Vicit vim Virtus

courage has conquered violence
Bart De Wever, May 25, 2014, 9:02 p.m.

with thanks to
Bart De Wever, for his vision and trust
Ben Weyts, for his insight and brainpower
Piet De Zaeger, for his acuity and decisiveness
Joachim Pohlmann, for his predictions and humor
Liesbeth Homans, for her emotional vigor
Fons Duchateau, for his pragmatism and positivism
Sander Loones, for his structure and perspicacity
Nele Hiers and her team for their effectiveness
Jef, Joris, Peter, Sas and their teams for their creativity
Alec, Tom, Filip and their teams for their digital inventiveness
Rogier, Olga and their teams for their knowledge of production
my wife Machteld for her unconditional support and love

and above all infinite thanks
to all N-VA employees, politicians, militants, partners and party members, without whose efforts the N-VA would never have won these elections

ERIK SAELENS **BRAND ED**

FOREWORD

The essence of branding is that when you hear the name of a particular brand, or see an image associated with it (logo), a pattern is activated in your brain. A pattern that consciously or unconsciously evokes expectations, experiences, images and associations connected with that brand. In this respect a brand is like a computer's operating system. It governs the way you form images.

The goal of branding is that you become less sensitive to changes the brand introduces. This could be a change in price, additional products or services offered by the brand, a bad experience you had with the brand, and so on. Still, because the brand has built up a degree of trust in your brain (and preferably your heart), it has a certain amount of credit and you remain loyal. But sometimes the brand's credit runs out. This can happen because of bad experiences with the brand, because the brand has been dishonest with you one time too many, or because a new brand has appeared on the scene that promises to be more meaningful to you. Deep in your subconscious, you become disappointed with your current brand; you turn your back on it and choose a new brand. In fact, brands

fight for your trust and loyalty. Both in your brain – consciously or unconsciously – and in your heart.

This book is about such a battle. The battle between the brand N-VA and all the other political brands that angled for Belgian votes on May 25, 2014. And about the role that my Brandhome team, the N-VA team, several loyal partners and I played in that period. What is certain is that this period will go down in the history of Belgian political marketing as a textbook example of a failed "everyone against the N-VA" strategy. About how that "everyone against the N-VA" strategy had the opposite effect, and actually convinced people to vote *for* the N-VA. Because the real holders of power in this country – the voters – are not stupid. Like you, they are connected. Like you, they are informed. Like you, they are tired of political brands talking to them as if they were children. Like you, they are tired of the disinformation served up by the traditional press. Like you, they want objective facts. Like you, they want an explanation. And, like you, if they don't find it in the traditional press, they will cancel their newspaper subscriptions and use other channels to inform themselves. Because they – like you – no longer want to pay someone to lie to them. That "everyone against the N-VA" strategy left a bad taste in the mouths of Belgian voters, whose votes delivered the coup de grace to old-fashioned political (marketing) ideas and the mingling of fact and opinion in the press. This book is about them – and hopefully it will turn out to be about you, too.

I wrote this book on the basis of the logbook I kept from day one of the N-VA campaign. Even though it is only a fraction of that logbook, it gives you an idea of the unique road that has been traveled. I consciously chose to keep the text of the book authentic, as close as possible to the notes I jotted down daily in my logbook. In the emotion of the moment. In the emotional value of the moment. In the value of my character as a professional, as a father, and as a citizen. In order to give you a real reflection of the situations, however astonishing, hopeless, pleasant or surprising they might have been. In this way you can experience something of our unique journey, and you can form your own opinion.

I will give three interviews about this book. The first to the N-VA magazine – after all, it's their story. The second goes to the Flemish press. The third goes to the international press. After that, this chapter is closed.
If you're expecting a literary masterpiece, I'm afraid you'll be disappointed. What you have before you is the logbook of a campaign. A campaign for the N-VA that will have "branded" me forever, both as a human being and as a professional.

Erik O.W.A. SAELENS
Antwerp, July 27, 2014

PS (Post Scriptum)
Not all anecdotes and incidents are included in this book. They wouldn't fit in just one book – they probably need a whole library. I'll be drawing inspiration from them for years to come.

PPS (Post-Post Scriptum)
This book is written in my own name, on the basis of my own logbook – not in the name of Brandhome, and not in the name of the N-VA.

PPPS (Post-Post-Post Scriptum)
All proceeds from this book go to the Brandhome foundation, a non-profit organization whose goal is to offer support to disadvantaged children in Flanders and the Southern Netherlands. You can contribute at:

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1.
THE DILEMMA

It's June 18, 2013, when I get an e-mail that I should probably frame so I can hang it up in my office at home:

Dear Mr. Saelens, dear Erik,
Is it possible to have an exploratory conversation with you about preparing our election campaign for 2014? I could come to Antwerp if necessary.
Sincerely,
Piet De Zaeger
General Director, N-VA

At the moment I'm in Cannes, for the Cannes Lions Festival. What Mecca is to Muslims, Cannes is to people in advertising. The prestigious festival is practically a religious celebration for the international advertising world: you have to have been at least once in your life, and what you do there is pray that luck is on your side. The difference is that luck here consists of winning a bronze, silver or gold statuette of a winged lion and temporarily enjoying lasting fame in the trade press at home. Let's just say to every world its heaven.

As for me, I'm not here to pray, but to preach. I'm here to give a presentation on Triple-A brands to follow up the publication of my book *In Triple-A We Trust*. It's about my conviction that brands need to base their way of thinking and all their actions on three important pillars: *Authenticity*, *Accountability* and *Activation*. In short, it's about a vision that is diametrically opposed to the usual striving to create content-free images. Back home, in Belgium, this has put our agency Brandhome beyond the bounds of the established order of classic advertising agencies. Just how far beyond will sometimes be painfully clear later in this story; it will be just one of the consequences issuing forth from that particular mail of Piet's…

In the evening I'm going through my mails on a sunny terrace, but questions are whizzing around in my head. Is it for a pitch? Are there other agencies in the picture? Do we really need a political campaign? Is it going to be a flyer here, a poster there? Do they know that we always converse strategically throughout the process? Is it possible within such a political organization? I'm intrigued, maybe more than I'd like to admit. I know a number of colleagues at home and abroad who have been involved with political campaigns on more than one occasion. When they talked about it, there was a lot of sighing and rolling the eyes. The one constant in all their stories seemed to have two parts: 1. an unwillingness to decide on an explicit message, and 2. too many chefs in the kitchen. As one Dutch colleague described it: "Mud as message and molasses as organization."

As the evening sun slants across the terrace, these thoughts continue to excite me. In the course of my career I had already brought hundreds of branding operations to a satisfying conclusion for businesses and governments, from the simple to the super-complicated, but the elections of May 25, 2014: this was something else. A moment in time when three important elections – federal, regional and European – would coincide: this was going to be unique. You could compare it to astronomical phenomena like a total eclipse, or a comet that goes tearing past the earth once every thousand years… you have to have seen them, because they will never happen again in your lifetime.

One way or the other, I get the feeling that this could be something unique. Something that could turn out very differently than how we think of it today. It is the N-VA, to start with. Bart De Wever's party, which there's no getting around. I'm not big into television, but his appearance on the game show *De Slimste Mens* ("Who's the smartest of them all?") got my attention. Humor, charisma, personality, intelligence: no wonder nearly all the establishment politicians grind their teeth when they see him. The parliaments of this country are – to put it mildly – not exactly populated by people you would buy a ticket to go see, let's be honest. But Bart's engaging way of performing gives him – and with him the N-VA – a distinct advantage. It's not a pose. What you see is what you get: that's Bart De Wever. I know, because I've met him before. At the beginning of

2010 I e-mailed him to ask whether we might get together. Within 24 hours I had an answer and an appointment. I was struck by it; it really says something about a person. How many party leaders would answer an e-mail from a total stranger so quickly and so personally, and not even ask them to make an appointment with their secretary? Not many. My first encounter with Bart lasted about two hours and we talked about everything. It was what it was, an encounter, without any ulterior motives. A pleasant conversation about each other's lives, life in general, being an entrepreneur in Belgium (me) and a politician with a contrary opinion (him). We parted without any particular plans: "let's keep in touch." That happened, and the Bart I met later turned out to be the same Bart I met the first time, time after time. No theater, no reserve, no feigned attention. And always those sharp observations, strong convictions and healthy self-mockery that characterize him. The latter in particular is something you need a magnifying glass to find in politics, and I think it is precisely this aspect that so appeals to "ordinary people."

Contact with Bart led to us putting our heads together about the N-VA's strategy for the city council elections. In April 2012 I pull up my chair at the N-VA party headquarters in Brussels for a consultation and brainstorming session about the right approach. The newspaper *De Morgen*, which is following Bart for an in-depth portrait, will sketch me as someone who can dream, someone who sees the big things in the small. Not a bad sketch. I also remember that night as being inspiring as well: a lot of discussion, but in a very

good way, goal-oriented. What stays with me is the highly explicit goal that Bart laid on the table right off the bat. In that meeting he said: "I'm not going for 30% of the votes, I've already got those. I'm going for 35%, maybe even 40%. That's what I want, because I want to introduce change in politics and it has to start in Antwerp. So much change has started there. In this way I can appeal to the pride of Antwerp's inhabitants. *First we take Antwerp, then we take Brussels, that's how I want to play it.*"

For me, vision means you can look much further than your initial goal. You can look past and through your goal, as it were. I still remember that it was on that April evening in 2012 that I first got the feeling that Bart might really succeed in bringing about tangible change in this country. There, seated at that table, I saw the ultimate challenger: not only with the will to fight, but also with a clear-cut, well-defined plan for doing it. Many politicians stumble from one short-term vision to the next, partly because they spend too much time looking at what others are doing. This is one of the reasons why swords are drawn more frequently as elections draw nearer. I also realized what a battle it would be to achieve Bart's ultimate goal. In Antwerp, at any rate, he won the city council elections with flying colors, thanks in part to the ideas we formulated around that table: we wouldn't use classic advertising – too expensive, too little result – instead we would opt for a strategy of literally taking to the streets with Bart.

After that Bart was never home. From early in the morning until late in the evening he was on the campaign trail. It's not for everyone. Going door-to-door, shaking hands, making small talk. His presence in the streets meant that people were willing to talk to the many other N-VA militants who came calling. It's an approach that takes a lot of energy, but seamlessly joins the local character of the city council elections. These elections in particular are close to people's hearts, emotionally speaking. "Street performances" are a part of it, unlike national elections, which have a much broader, less personal character. The local campaign with Bart moreover generated a lot of publicity, including an anecdote in which the N-VA campaign bus dropped off everyone… except Bart… who no one noticed was still using the bus toilet. Including the bus driver, who was on the way to the parking lot with Bart still inside. A silly story in itself, but it came across well in the media as a human – and funny – misunderstanding.

The electoral success of the N-VA – with Bart De Wever in the mayor's seat of Antwerp as the crowning touch – has only made the other parties even more nervous and more venomous with respect to the N-VA. The battle that still faces the party in the run-up to the 2014 elections promises to be the same. It's going to be vicious, no doubt about it. But it excites me, the prospect of following something like this from so close by, at the side of a party that almost everyone is against. Because that would be difficult to deny.

What I know about the N-VA generally is what I've seen in the media and the latter are not unanimously positive about the N-VA and what it stands for. The gist of it is that the N-VA is a sort of "lite" version of the right-wing nationalist party Vlaams Blok, and is working for an independent Flanders. Is that really true, or is it necessary to dig deeper? Is the Flemish press really so subjective, or does it just seem that way? How do things stand with public broadcasting, how do they depict the N-VA? Reporting is equivalent to creating a public image, certainly when audiovisual media are involved. My intuition tells me that the choice of media will be crucial for whoever wins or loses the coming elections. How do you communicate your own political point of view so that it constantly determines the agenda of others as well as that of the media? How do you ensure that everyone is running after you, reactive and gasping for breath, instead of vice versa? These are things I shelve in my thoughts for now. Something for later, if indeed we get that far and start working for the N-VA. A big fat "maybe." Because apart from all those initial thoughts after Piet's e-mail, something else is at play here.

Specifically, we're participating in a bid for handling the city of Antwerp's communication. That's unusual in itself because we don't, out of principle, do pitches, competitions, bids or however you want to call a contest. That has nothing to do with lack of ambition or the will to fight. The simple truth is that I don't believe in it. Marketing and communication questions are far too complex to "just" solve

and that is exactly what is being asked during a bid. Three or four agencies get just three or four weeks' time to come up with a fabulous idea that's supposed to help a business or brand get ahead for years? I don't believe it. It is total nonsense to think that client and agency can get to know each other in such a short amount of time, and their getting to know each other is an absolute precondition for success. Seen in that light: Why say "yes" to the bid for the city? Two reasons outstripped my objections.

First Antwerp is the home base of Brandhome; we just moved to our new offices on the Falconplein. It sits at the junction of several worlds: between the old city center and the exclusive, up-and-coming harbor district, the red-light district, and the students' quarter around the University of Antwerp. In the evening, the bright orange lights of Brandhome shine out amongst all the red neon. You couldn't hope to find a more unique or vibrant location. Go see for yourself. It suits us. There's not another agency that would get it in its head to locate here; for us this was all the more reason to do it. We receive clients here from all over the world, and people come through the door with a big smile on their face. People like coming to Antwerp, we've noticed. It is by far the most creative, most dynamic city in the country. Given the high concentration of large international firms in Brussels, it is perhaps understandable that that's where most advertising agencies are located; at the same time, though, it's odd that a creative industry continues to remain in such a tired, inaccessible city.

Reason number two is the challenge it presents: I can think of no reason why Antwerp shouldn't be able to grow into one of the most creative hotspots in Europe. Amsterdam currently holds the title, but when all is said and done there is nothing to stop Antwerp from taking over the role. At Brandhome we always start from the identity of the brand. Well, the brand Antwerp certainly doesn't lack character and authenticity. We could do a lot with it. Antwerp as a client would be a perfect match as far as we're concerned.

But it confronts me with an extra question on top of all the other questions I've had since the N-VA's e-mail. Imagine that something does come of the conversation that I will have with the N-VA; how should I handle the bid for Antwerp? Bart De Wever is mayor of Antwerp, but Bart De Wever is also an N-VA leader. If Brandhome were to work for the N-VA and then win the Antwerp bid, well, I don't think I need to draw a diagram to show you what will happen. Even if everything followed the strictest standards of conduct, you would still be able to hear people screaming "conflict of interest!" as far away as the next solar system. No one would escape unscathed. In short, this is already what is known as a dilemma. Withdrawing could be an option. Could be, but withdrawing from what? The bid, or the conversation with Piet De Zaeger that hasn't even taken place yet? Can I already predict which we will enjoy the most, as a business and as human beings? The N-VA as a potential client – it's intriguing, but our working relationship might end after the elections in May

2014. The city's communication is a more long-term project from the get-go, so it's probably more interesting from a business perspective. After all, Brandhome has to continue beyond today – there are bills to pay.

Questions enough. There are no simple answers now. I'll wait for the conversation with the N-VA; then I'll know more and we'll see. While I wait, I dig deeper into the material, do some research, try to get more insight into the political playing field of the day. And have a look at the political campaigns of recent years, in Belgium and in other countries. It's impossible not to think right away of the grassroots campaign that not only provided funding for Obama's campaign, but also spread support for his candidacy across the US like wildfire. The use of online communication and social media was probably more fundamental to winning the presidency than anything else. Everyone was talking about the phenomenal *Yes, we can* speech, but as far as I'm concerned, the grassroots strategy was the key to his success. Would that be possible here? Would that be something for the N-VA? At first sight I don't see why not, but something like this always has to come from within the party. I have no idea whether the organization is ready for it, or even if they would want it. Yet another point for the upcoming conversation with Piet De Zaeger. The list is getting long.

2.
AND WE'RE OFF

Back from Cannes, life goes on as usual: in high gear. The promise of Brandhome is that we help our clients' brands to grow faster than the market. This is not obvious or easy to accomplish and we don't exactly employ a whole army of people to do it. We keep our office *lean & mean*, and work with a small core group of the best people. The future belongs to small, effective units that stick very closely with clients, their brands and their markets. Brandhome wants to be a real strategic partner that thinks and acts with the client rather than a classic advertising bureau. We don't bother with all kinds of loose campaigns for new products or actions that are merely meant to increase name recognition. That is "much ado about nothing," to borrow Shakespeare's words. A serious brand doesn't gain much from it. I talk to a lot of business leaders and marketers in Belgium and abroad, and I have a very strong feeling that there, too, the realization is growing that brands undermine their value by stumbling along from campaign to campaign. My concept is: you're better off following a solid line than a dotted line. Think long term, remain true to your principles and above all keep your eye on the ball. Simple? Nothing is what it seems. In practice it is so easy not to keep everyone in line in a brand organization. It is one of the reasons why we like to stay so close to our clients. Watchdog Brandhome.

"We're facing the Mother of All Elections. Want to help?" asked Piet De Zaeger. People that get right to the point, I like that. Piet De Zaeger is apparently just such a person. On the morning of

July 2 he's sitting together with national spokesman Joachim Pohlmann and Nele Hiers, the communications manager of N-VA, in our office in Antwerp. Piet does most of the talking; the others fill in where necessary. They have their affairs in order, they know where they want to go and how complicated it will be to get there. You can tell by looking at them that the N-VA is a party without ancient history or a traditional past. The new generation is differently positioned than the political elite of the past. Younger people, more realistic, more strongly oriented toward realizing actual change in society, much less interested in the nice job that might be waiting for them at the end of the ride. Piet and his colleagues do not lack idealistic fervor, but at the same time their story is objective and professionally presented. The entire meeting takes about an hour – not exactly what you'd call long, but by the end of it they have managed to get their message across with utmost clarity – and with a healthy dose of laughter to boot. They have a great sense of humor. I didn't expect that at all.

The goal of the N-VA is breathtakingly simple: "We want more than 30% of the votes on May 25. Period." And another point: "No one should be able to get around us; it's that simple. We don't want to win the elections again and then be put aside. We think it's possible, we think it has to happen now, we have the momentum. The question is, how we can make optimal use of it." The momentum is certainly there. In a poll conducted by TV broadcaster VTM and

the newspaper *De Morgen* on June 16, just two weeks before our conversation, the N-VA came out with 35% of the votes. Unheard of. But, as politicians in the Netherlands like to say: "polls are polls." You can be the big winner in the polls for months on end, but in the end all that matters are the results on election day.

Starting from today, July 2, 2013, there are still eleven months to go. This is a whole lifetime. What can go wrong is not the question. In such a long period, anything and everything can derail. You can take a lot of things into account, but there is always something that you can neither predict nor even suspect now, at this very moment. In fact you shouldn't even try. Instead, it is absolutely necessary to make your own story so strong and to communicate so steadfastly that it determines everyone else's agenda. Then at least you won't be lagging behind the facts. That is a strategic lesson I've learned from various mentors over the years.

It's for this reason that Piet & co. are having coffee with us. Their present bureau: nothing but praise, but their strength is primarily in execution and there is a need for a strong strategic and conceptual sparring partner. An agency that is able to think strategically and be creatively unorthodox about the communications approach in the run-up to the elections in 2014. It should be Brandhome. "It's funny," says Piet, "when I look at Brandhome: in a certain sense you guys as an agency are just like the N-VA as a party. You and us, we

both think against the classic grain and you see the same reactions come up in your field as we see in politics: *you're not one of us*. The feeling of us against the rest. Personally I find it more stimulating than annoying; I don't know how or if you experience it." My answer to this is: "I don't." At any rate I don't think about it. The path we've taken at Brandhome is simply motivated by my conviction that, to start with, you don't have to do what everybody else is doing. That everybody else in the market shakes their heads pityingly or doesn't take us seriously: enjoy! I don't have to prove I'm right. That in the meantime we're working for several big names in the Belgian and international business world, and that we're involved behind the scenes in some of the most complicated marketing dossiers in the world, that says enough for me. They don't choose you because you have blue eyes.

For the N-VA, however, being looked at with suspicion is another story. The N-VA has already come a long way, but it is still not *salonfähig* – to use a good Flemish management word. That is to say, it's still not always considered *bon ton* – to use a good English one. Not everyone would dare to admit they were an N-VA follower, and I say so: "That is something that's going to dog you in the campaign. I think you seriously need to work on that. Otherwise your opponents will have room to keep pushing you aside as the party with the big mouth that wants to undermine the country." I notice from the nodding heads across from me that they have probably

thought about this before. If the N-VA has an Achilles heel, this could be it. At the moment it's little more than a gut feeling, unsupported by scientific research or the like, but I still think that a lot of people are afraid of the reactions they'll get if they say that they agree with the N-VA. Perhaps it arouses aggression; perhaps it provokes laughter. Intuitively I think that it's necessary to make sure that it becomes "normal" to vote for the N-VA. Later I will think back on this observation; it will eventually play an important role in our approach.

Towards the end, the conversation takes an unexpected turn. In this sense unexpected: it is the first time that, during a conversation with a potential client, I'm warned of the possible consequences of working together. "There is one thing you have to realize: if you work with us, sooner or later there's no doubt that will come to light. I'm saying it honestly: you will have to take annoying reactions into account. And when I say annoying, I mean it: hard, blunt and personal. You said it yourself – about our not being *salonfähig* – well, that's an understatement. Let me formulate it like this," says Piet with a smile, "there are birthday parties, a lot of them even, where you had best not say that you work for the N-VA. I'm saying it out of experience, and Joachim, Nele – and Bart, of course – nearly everyone in the N-VA has encountered it. At any rate we've had nearly everything thrown at us, from being given the finger at the baker's to e-mails you don't even want to know about. And watch out, it's like this from the start

– we've been going through it ever since the N-VA took shape in the political arena. It hasn't died down; rather, it's gotten worse. It can be really extreme. In the meantime we're used to it after all these years, but it's unpleasant. I'm not saying it will happen to you, you and your people here, but I wanted to be sure you knew about it. It's sad but true, there it is; it happens, and I think it's right to inform people we invite to work with us. Then, dryly: "When can you start?"

We agree that I'll take some time to let it all sink in. I mention briefly that we are one of the candidates bidding on the communications contract for the city of Antwerp, with the possibility of conflict of interest that could bring. The N-VA already knows about it, but they leave it up to me to decide how to handle it. That's what I was afraid of. They're right of course: corporate leadership of Brandhome is none of their business; it is, literally and figuratively, my business. So figure it out, Saelens. Whatever comes of it, the conversation more than satisfied my curiosity as to the N-VA's plans. In my head, it had already sort of clicked. I just feel like doing it. The N-VA answers to my criteria as to whether or not something is worth doing. Is it a unique challenge? YES! Is it fun? YES! Are we able to do it? YES! The warning about the eventual consequences affected me, though. Not something to ignore. In fact I had a little foretaste in 2012. This was after *De Morgen* mentioned my name and that of Brandhome as being involved with the N-VA campaign in the run-up to the city council elections. Shortly afterward I received word from Brussels

that a major Belgian telecom operator was closing its doors to Brandhome. And our contract with the daughter company for which we were working was illegally broken. You're no longer welcome, thank you. I have no illusions that something similar won't happen again. But we also don't have to see spooks around every corner. If you start thinking like that, you'll never get anything done in life. The warning is understood; we'll see what happens and deal with it if it comes to that.

But a man warned is as good as two. In the evening I decide that if we do take on this project, I will start up a contact & content log for the project from the moment we begin up to and including May 25, 2014. A contact & content log is a logbook with all contacts that you have had during such a project: with whom, about what, where, why, what was the result, etc. Something I learned from stock market projects, better known as IPO or Initial Public Offering. When you are involved in such projects as a communications expert, you had best keep such a log. This I learned years ago in the Netherlands from a colleague, who, thanks to such a logbook did not end up in jail after a large Internet company collapsed several weeks after it went public. He could prove that someone else had leaked information, not him. I do it often – in fact for all hypersensitive projects in which I am involved as strategic director. It takes discipline, and it is a lonely obligation, because without anyone whatsoever knowing about it, you usually write in your logbook at night before going to bed.

I've gotten really good at it after all these years. In fact, it was this idea that prompted me to write the book *Two Marketing Buddies Walk into Buddha* with my friend Kurt Frenier. Right. So what do you do with that logbook at the end of a project? When everything has been brought to a happy conclusion, you can do whatever you want with it. You're so sick of it, you can ritually burn it. Or you give it to the highest executive in the company, who is usually amazed at your professionalism. Or you hide it in a safe place. Or… yeah, you use it as the basis for writing a book. But first get started. In September the plan for our approach has to be ready. That seems like it's still far away, but campaign development goes step by step and there is an incredible amount of work to do.

Days after the conversation I have a meeting with the Brandhomies, as we call our colleagues at Brandhome. I bring them up to date on the plans to do the N-VA campaign for 2014. The team will be a small one. In addition to myself, my right-hand man for strategy and concept, Jef, my other right hand, Alec, a driven online and social media geek, and Sas, as operational spider in the web. We will form the core, supplemented by a few creatives. The moment more specific help is needed, we have a number of trusted external talents on standby. It is the way we work in this kind of project. That has a number of advantages: lines of communication are as short as possible; we can shift gears at top speed; and all knowledge stays within that small core group of people. The latter in particular is

essential. Our way of working means that we work very closely with our clients. That means that they have to be able to provide us with extremely confidential information without being afraid that any of it is going to slip out. At Brandhome we work as a general rule with a Non-Disclosure Agreement (NDA), which is probably among the strictest in the world. The Brandhome NDA is our version of the Fear of God. Those who sign the NDA know that a lot of financial blood will flow if he or she turns out to be responsible for anything whatsoever that gets out, or even the very whiff of conflicted interests of any kind. Up to now it's only gone wrong once – namely, with one of my first business partners. He thought it would be a good idea to use foreknowledge from our relationship with TeleAtlas in order to profit from their plans to merge with TomTom. I won't go into detail, but take it from me – it was a major error of judgment on his part.

In a meeting with our team I also discuss the possible reactions that working for this client can bring. I also ask if anyone has personal objections to working for the N-VA. After all, a political campaign is different than positioning an automobile brand or mobile operator in the market. It's about convictions in the end, and ideas about how to organize society. If anyone as a private individual should have a problem with that, their feelings deserve respect, but then the Brandhome N-VA team is no place for them. It's either go for it

100% or 100% no go. But everyone is ok with the idea and wants to do it just as much as I do.

In the days that follow I draw up a cooperation proposal on paper. What I see before me is that we're going to unleash the Brandhome method® on the N-VA. It is a method of thinking developed by me that ensures a high degree of policy and strategic guidance. With the Brandhome method® an organization takes a brief step backwards in order to see where they stand and where they need to go. The way we apply this method, it's a confrontational look in the mirror that inevitably raises questions that an organization might not so easily ask itself. Will this technique also fly for a political party like the N-VA? I would dare to say: for them most of all. If there is one party that's going to be examined with a magnifying glass – by voters, by other parties, by the media – then it's the N-VA. They can't afford anything wrong. Not the people in the party, not the message of the party, not their positions, not the promises they make to the people, not the way they get their messages across. My observation is that the N-VA as a brand is very strong, but it only exists in the minds of a few responsible people. This can lead to the perception that "everyone" pretty much knows what the N-VA stands for. An assumption that can be fatal for a campaign on which so much depends. One of the things that is part of the Brandhome method® is the development of a brand story, summed up in a brand book. A record of all essential elements that together form the N-VA brand and make the N-VA

story crystal clear to people who do not belong to the inner circle of decision makers.

In the proposal I have made two starting points essential to the steps we would have to take:

1) Preserving and strengthening the brand and marketing base of N-VA

For this we need among other things the application of the Brandhome method® plus the strategic and creative exercises it generates. The idea that already animates the N-VA is "the power of change." There's a lot to be said for it. It is a strong reflection of what the N-VA carries within itself, and fits in with the movement you see cropping up in different parts of the world. In international think tanks, too, the word change is high up on the agenda. The discussion is about how that has to take shape, whether change has to be total, whether that which is good needs to be protected. Whether it has to go fast or come about gradually. Whether it has to come from the people themselves or has to be imposed from above. "Change" is a fantastic concept, but also an open-ended concept. It speaks to the imagination of many, but cries out for sharp interpretation – otherwise it goes in all directions. I think there is still work to do on "the power of change" as far as its content is concerned, and my feeling is that we should also see if we can't make an even more appealing sentence out of it.

2) More and different market research, to know more and different things

You usually do research for two reasons as far as I'm concerned. First: you want to measure what you already think you know in order to see it confirmed in figures. Second: you want to look for new insights. You shouldn't do research, however, because other people do. There is a lot of existing research that can be bought, but whoever does that only has the same research results as everybody else. Our idea is to set up our own research platform with which we can gather information that is specifically applicable to the N-VA. We have to write ourselves a basis of questions about how we want to do that research or have it done for us.

Together with several other observations and a temporary budget, the entire proposal hardly takes up four sheets of paper. On July 7 I mail it to Piet with a request to contact me about it soon. He seems to agree, broadly speaking. He understands how the Brandhome method® can work to get the N-VA's message in shape, not only for building a better campaign, but also for everyone who will be directly involved in the campaign. It is a prerequisite that we speak with one voice from now until May 25, 2014. From the national spokesman to the local politician anywhere in the country, the central narrative has to be clear and consistent in every word that enters the public sphere.

During my conference call with Piet later in the week we can't help thinking forward to a concept for the campaign. Piet seems to have a good feel for the need, in our present age, to think not only in words but also in images and symbols: "I think we need an image that in one way or another expresses change. Something that takes root quickly and can also be easily used in all possible expressions. I have no idea what that should be, but fine, that's your job, right Erik?" says Piet on the telephone. Fine, thanks Piet. But couldn't disagree more. A strong image helps immensely to nestle into collective memory – after all, we live in an image culture. The easier we can make it for people to associated the message with an image and a symbolism, the better. Of course it's up to the party politicians to carry the convictions and party platform. But it would help enormously if they could also appear on the TV screen with "something" that immediately and inextricably binds them to the N-VA campaign. By addressing this here and now, we're naturally getting ahead of the pack. But it can't hurt to plant the seeds. This will be obvious a few days hence.

Inside Brandhome we're already playing around with the concept of change. A game of free association in which we try as much as possible to think visually. I fill several sheets of paper with doodles, but on one of the first I've drawn a "V." I keep coming back to it; it's the simplest of signs and little figures that have snowed the paper under. Squares with election bubbles, round arrows that form

a circle, the word change – in Dutch "Verandering" – with a little yellow heart for the "V" – don't laugh: you don't have to be critical during such an exercise – it's not called "free association" for nothing. The V I've written down looks like the V-sign of Winston Churchill, the V of *Victory*. Google provides me with more examples of hands and fingers making the V-sign. It's got something, but then it's also a cliché. Everybody already knows it. It's nothing new. I'm already asking myself: can I picture Bart De Wever on a podium somewhere, making the same sign that long-haired hippies already came up with in the 1960s? What kind of message does that send? *Peace brother*, let's all change together? Let's think it over some more. At any rate I share the thought with the rest of the team. They have to find out what the connotations are where the V-sign is concerned. I'm not scrapping it for the moment, though. There is no doubt in my mind that at other agencies, the ones with cabinets full of creative awards, they would fire anyone who came up with such an "idea" because "it's already been done before." Not creative enough – or worse, just not creative. What luck: I can't fire myself! So just run with it, see what you can do with it. You have to start somewhere.

In the days that follow we get more input from the N-VA. First there is the election program, still a work in progress, but the foundations are solid. It contains fifty pages describing the ideal society according to the N-VA, and what that means for governing such a society. You can say what you want about it, but not that they haven't given it

some thought. We make it our own; we go over it with a fine-toothed comb. Much of what's in here will after all play a role in the election campaign. We've got to compete on the basis of content, because that's the only way to take and keep the initiative. We also receive piles and piles of N-VA brochures. We understand their intentions, but what we see doesn't make us particularly happy. Big chunks of text, lots of pages. Even an interested reader would have a hard time getting through it, let alone remembering anything. Otherwise there's no drama. Just another point of attention. Fact is: we're off.

3.
V UNDER CONSTRUCTION

Our collaboration with the N-VA is not really a collaboration yet. It only exists in our head, on both sides of the fence. There's nothing on paper, no contract, no signatures. We haven't even had a serious conversation about money. Unusual. All for later. I grant you, we're not an agency that works for free. It is an open secret, at least in the field of communication, that political parties in general do not want to spend too much money on the agencies that give them advice. The reason is simple: payment comes later. If all goes well with the elections, and the ministries have been parceled out, there will certainly be a juicy government account waiting. Of course, a call for tenders will have to be issued, but – surprise, surprise – the job usually goes to the agency that so diligently supported the ministerial party. In Belgium's defense, allow me to say that it doesn't only happen here. It works the same way in other – if not all – countries, and sometimes with less subtlety. Backs are evidently there to be scratched. Ironically, I am fairly certain that agencies are not climbing all over each other to work for the N-VA. Even though it's the party that will have a couple of important seats in government next year. This will have two causes: in the first place they have figured out that the N-VA isn't made up of the usual kind of back-scratchers; in the second, they're terrified of being seen as the N-VA agency. What would their precious colleagues say?

For the time being I can only say they don't know what they're missing. We've had a good understanding with the N-VA since that

first meeting in July. That doesn't happen very often. A new working relationship usually needs time to grow. That takes time. You have to get to know each other, get insight into how one thinks and works on both sides, how people are used to interacting with one another, if you can make jokes from time to time. Little things that at first glance have little to do with content, but nothing could be further from the truth. If you have a good feel for one another, you can get to the point much faster, go deeper into the content faster. It is important to feel free to tell each other the truth. That's not easy, especially at the beginning of a relationship, when people are still inclined to beat around the bush. That slows things down and what's worse, has the opposite effect to what is intended, because it's even more disappointing – after all that comforting nonsense – when you still end up having a thorny discussion. There's already no chance of that happening with the N-VA. I've already noticed that they can take a blow or two. The reactions we get from them in conversations we have about the future are never of the type: "…but aren't you afraid that…" Thank god, because it's typically the question of people who are afraid themselves.

While Piet De Zaeger recharges his batteries during a vacation on the Canary Islands (to put it mildly, there's probably not going to be any more free time from now until the end of May), we continue thinking about developing the V as a possible campaign symbol. I send myself e-mails about it. I do that regularly and I recommend

it to everyone. You can make as many notes as you like, on paper, your laptop, or your smartphone, but for one reason or another you rarely read them again. You are guaranteed to read a mail to yourself, and then you see everything with fresh eyes. I'm inclined to think in terms of keywords, so everything is all piled together:

V+V = VV = W of Welfare, Wellness, Work opportunities…

Bart De Wever with 2 V that make a W, and his face behind it

voting intentions within member base, online test, telephone test, own channel

V for "Verandering" (change), because change is the only constant
Vlaanderen (Flanders), Victory; famous people who have ever made the V-sign

"this is N-VA", that doesn't communicate; because what do you read? what do you remember?

denken, durven, doen, dromen, dan weer denken (think, dare, do, dream, and think again); it's a four-way flow

KVDV = Kracht Van De Verandering (The Power of Change)
with url www.kvdv.be
proposition brand with little shield as logo

Why was I apparently thinking that a V should become a W? We have indeed philosophized about what change might mean. The N-VA for its part attaches great importance to issues such as Wellness, Welfare, Work opportunities. The relevance is clear, but to me it sounds a bit too clichéd. These are the standard buzzwords of the elections. Soon every politician from the left to the right will be using these exact same words. The result is that people hear these words so often and from so many angles that they lose all meaning. Even worse, soon enough no one knows who said what about welfare, and who said what about work opportunities. We all want these things at the end of the day, so there is no politician who will forgo the chance to talk about them. So the two Vs form a W: it seems a bit strained to me now. The V loses meaning this way, and that's not the idea. It is confusing and moreover it is not a choice. That is the last thing in the world we want. I also can't picture Bart doing it, that business with two times two fingers. Maybe just for a photo, but not at the end of a speech, for example. But that's the idea. I've become convinced that a campaign symbol has to be alive. What I mean by that is that it has to be borne by the people themselves and it has to be possible to use it. It can't just be an icon or something similar. Or a little shield: I leave the last note on the list for what it is. Something like that doesn't take root. Only something alive can live among the people. That's just the way it is.

Don't mess with the V, that's what it boils down to. Sticking two fingers in the air, anyone can do that, so that's already good. That it's been done before, well, so be it. It's about a symbol to which an overwhelmingly positive image adheres. I have asked Alec and his team to put together a list of all possible connotations that we could think of or hunt down with respect to using the V-sign. It is an interesting list with a few fun factoids. It is clear that you should never make a V with the back of your hand turned toward someone, which comes down to the same thing as giving them the finger. To be avoided. A nice contradiction on the list comes from the hippy era. The V-sign was their way to signal peace, friendship and brotherhood. At the same time, hippies were associated with lazy longhaired marijuana smokers who even preferred to demonstrate while sitting or lying down. On the other hand, hippies were generally an innocent, happy people who did little harm. As far as I'm concerned it doesn't harm the image of the V-sign either. One last fact concerns the origin of the V-sign, although it might be a good thing that it's a brilliant myth. During the war between England and France in the 15th century, the English were menaced by the French. The latter threatened to cut off the fore- and middle finger of English prisoners, so that they could no longer shoot a bow. Alas, the war was one big fiasco for the French. After that, the English held up their fingers in a V-sign in their confrontations with the French as a reminder that they were still in possession of their two most important fingers. Whatever the case may be, the V-sign is amply charged

with meaning. Presidents, pop stars, freedom fighters, Nobel Prize winners, top athletes… and yes, even Bart De Wever on the evening of victory in the Antwerp city council elections, as it appears from our desk research… they all used the V-sign and contributed to the symbolism that it evokes in collective memory.

Apart from that, the V-sign seems to express a positive image. The question is if – and how – it can be inextricably bound to the N-VA's entire package of party issues. Yes, the Dutch word for election promises – "verkiezingsbeloften" – also happens to begin with a V, but this is not true of the lion's share of subjects that are part of it. KVDV, from "kracht van de verandering" – Dutch for the power of change – I'm still not entirely sure that the V and the V-sign fit with this concept. It's not a seamless whole. There's too much room between gesture and promise. In short, it contains something good, but if we can't give it a pulse, it's on to the next idea. There's still time, but not an infinite amount. The N-VA has specifically asked that we ensure that the branding of their future vision, which will be presented at the end of October 2013, will also fall in line with the party convention at the end of January 2014 and the campaign period up to and including May 25, 2014. So it amounts to the same thing: let's figure out right now how we're going to reach the elections on May 25, 2014. And everything we do has to fit in with the N-VA brand building blocks as defined in the meantime using the Brandhome method®.

We're working hard at it. All possible brand elements are mapped out, individually broken down, described and collected in a concise document. The power of the Brandhome method® is that it reduces the overabundance of information, opinions and emotions that pile up around a brand to the essentials. Emotion has nothing to do with it at this stage. It is a purely rational, analytic process in which we capture each individual element in words as compactly and objectively as possible. The brand book is not meant to convince, it is meant to depict. What are we dealing with here, what are the actual strengths, what are the testimonials, what are the distinguishing features? Target public, core values, insights, functional and emotional assets, brand story, brand positioning, brand promise, pay-off, campaign promise: each and every one is an element that we hold up to the light once more and formulate in the sharpest possible terms. One of the most interesting elements of the brand book is the identity prism. It is a scheme that serves to bring together all aspects and core values that apply to a particular brand: physical values, cultural values, values that reflect its personality, values that have to do with the relationships between people. The identity prism makes it possible to group all these loose values together in a coherent pattern. This is highly enlightening because you suddenly see a real person come into being. True, only in words, but it doesn't have any less character for all that; there is really someone there. Brand has become human. In this way you can judge who he (or she) is, what he stands for, what he has in mind and what he feels about it.

It enables us to see if – and how – the content of an identity connects with what people feel when they look at – in this case – the N-VA. The identity prism helps you build bridges between the brand's position and the image the receiver has of it. In the case of the N-VA, it could be a position like this: N-VA is capable of more than the other political parties. This can be translated into a self-image: N-VA bundles the positive aspects of all parties. The identity prism is indispensable for reflecting all the content-related character traits of a brand onto the people who ought to bond with the brand – and vice versa. It ensures that gaps do not easily form between what you want to communicate and the people you want to influence with your message.

All of this accumulates in the storyline we are developing for the N-VA. A story of not more than two A4 sheets of paper that form the basis of the coming campaign. It goes without saying that the word "change" has the upper hand. The importance and necessity of changing, the will to do things differently, the dream of giving the country a new élan by rethinking various fields: this is the core of the N-VA. The campaign promise "the power of change" is there for a reason. Unquestionably. Secretly I think a better line can be squeezed out of it that will give the campaign extra oomph. But not yet.

It is halfway through August when we gather round the table at the N-VA party headquarters to discuss all this. In addition to Piet,

Joachim and Nele, the coordinator of the research department, Sander Loones, and the coordinator of team organization, Fons Duchateau are now of the party (no pun intended). The brand format is discussed extensively, as is the storyline. As always when "foreign eyes" look in from the outside, this kind of brand format is somewhat confrontational. Because we had already mailed the format in advance, there were a lot of questions and remarks as expected. The balance is at any rate positive. On the whole it fits, but because the N-VA staffers each looked at it from the point of view of their own expertise, there are new points of view that give new insights. The brand format can only profit from all this, become sharper, more pronounced. It is a fruitful meeting that not only sets a number of issues straight, but also has an inspiring effect. It confirms again my decision to do this project. In the upper reaches of the N-VA, thinking fast and shifting mental gears at top speed is the order of the day. Maybe it's just because there's such an enormous lot to do in order to get the election campaign off the ground and every day counts. But I've had the impression before that they are already accustomed to making firm decisions and not getting bogged down in endless talk. It's part of the party's culture. Lines of communication are short. "Not so difficult," they say with a bit of irony, "there aren't that many of us."

The next step will be that we complete and refine the brand format, and using the storyline start seriously thinking about the campaign in 2014. In other words: it is high time that our V comes out from

under wraps so we can see how it stands on its own two feet. That's one. Two is that, if possible, this will have to coincide with the manner of communication. Which messages will have to be most central, which have the most value for which voters and which media are we going to use – this last is also such an annoying question to wrestle with. Positioning brands is never an easy piece. Free publicity is the gold standard of politics, but the question is of course to what extent the Flemish media want to play gold mine when it comes to the N-VA. Later we will notice that as far as that's concerned, it's much worse than we now imagine.

In the meantime I have already let Piet De Zaeger know that Brandhome has withdrawn from the tender for the city of Antwerp's communication. One choice leads to another. Our principle is that we can never have thrown in our face that what we're doing reeks of conflict of interest or unfair financial advantage. The way we work with all businesses and organizations that approach us is clean and above board. Deviating from this principle – even a little – would mean the beginning of the end. In this case, as mentioned before, circumstances are extremely sensitive. You simply could not explain that you were working for the N-VA and at the same time had been chosen to work for a city where the most famous member of the N-VA just happened to be mayor. Just try to explain that it was purely a matter of chance. If anyone succeeded in that, I'd hire them on the spot.

4.
INTO THE ABYSS

In September, life begins again. Summer slowly begins to think about hibernating, the gray flannel suits report *en masse* to their offices, Brussels is reassuringly unreachable by car. For me September feels like a kind of New Year's. Everything starts anew, business gets up to speed and even the government begins to show signs of manning enough service counters. This year brings something extra along with it. In politics and the media, May 25 is already starting to dominate people's agendas. People are looking ahead. The polls in recent months have given cause for unrest among the backbenchers and established ranks of the left. The N-VA has shot ahead of the rest and this has already been the cause of the occasional political spasm in the revolving door between the other parties and their media partners. It doesn't mean anything yet; these are still just the first pinpricks. They don't hurt, but they do make them alert. These are the sly digs that portray the N-VA as the party of institutional reform, the party that wants to break up Belgium. There is no doubt that this anvil will be hammered on with increasing force as May 25 approaches. Although people are staying calm within the N-VA, it is certainly a point of concern. On September 3, the first meeting with the N-VA after the summer, it has already been thoroughly discussed. Everyone agrees that it makes little sense to counter every little rumor about Belgium's imminent demise that crops up. That would only cost energy, would be wasted effort. With each new reaction you give your political opponents more fodder for their next round of attacks, and the media disregard your defense in advance. It is more useful

to spread your own, much broader story as fast as possible, from the smallest election promise to the broad themes in which everything comes together. The entire framing of the presumed division of Belgium by the N-VA is a hot-air balloon. Our own story will deflate it as a matter of course. This is much more effective than trying to shoot it down now, even though our fingers may be itching to do so.

As complete as the N-VA brand story may be, it is still little more than a foundation for building the house that is the election campaign. The basis is there, the bricks are there, but the most important thing now is to make the mortar we need to cement everything together. In the days after the staff meeting I e-mail about this with Sander Loones, who is not only a sharp guy but also a walking N-VA Wikipedia. I want more insight into what he and others in the N-VA see as key messages and more concrete election promises. We have been talking about "change" the whole time, but we've also noted that we can't leave it fluttering in the breeze. The campaign that helped Barack Obama into the White House in 2008 also had change as a central theme. I'm thinking especially of the campaign slogan *Change we can believe in* and above all, the soaring *Yes, we can!* Splendid. Compelling. Binding. But our Brandhome research showed that there was more to it than that. The core of the American spirit in three words. It couldn't be better. But it would have devolved into pure campaign rhetoric if there hadn't been concrete, clear, hope-inspiring propositions attached to it – for

example, the introduction of healthcare for every American, concrete plans to fight poverty and restore the middle class. In America these were and still are plans that for many people are tantamount to communism. These were plans that everyone knew deep down would bring on bitter controversy. For that very reason, the Yes, we can! was exactly what Obama's ideas needed. What I mean is, you can't have one without the other.

That is why I'm probing Sander to find out about any actual "hard" promises. By that I mean promises that make it easier for people to bind themselves to the N-VA as the party of change. Bluntly put: I vote N-VA so I'll get better healthcare. Or: I vote N-VA so I can feel safer. Or: I vote N-VA so I'll have more opportunities. Subjects that support the brand promise, above all, but also that you can use to make people understand just what promises the N-VA actually means. Smaller, human promises that can improve the citizen's day-to-day existence. We know a lot about that citizen – that voter – but not enough. I'm probably more worried about that than anything else. That's the marketeer in me. That's how I was trained by my Dutch mentors. What I'm asking myself is whether we have insight into what drives people in Flanders today. Do we know what the biggest collective mainsprings are that drive our various target groups? The N-VA is a brand with around 30% market share; if it wants to get bigger, then we have to find the greatest common denominator so that we can take aim at it with the right promises

and the overall brand promise. Preaching to the converted keeps 30% of the voters in the polls satisfied, but with a bigger net it's possible to catch more fish – everybody knows that. New growth is at any rate recommended. The percentage of voters now saying "yes" is so frighteningly high that I ask myself how, with everything that awaits the N-VA in the coming months, are we going to maintain that level of support in the voting booths? It's enough to make a guy break into a nervous sweat just thinking about it. We just can't drill deeply enough to reach more voter reserves to compensate in advance for the people who are now saying "yes" to the N-VA right now, but maybe later will be saying "uh… maybe not."

Sander's going to take that up, so it will be fine. In the meantime it's nice to see that the N-VA is also busy becoming a real client on paper. Formal agreements are made about how we will work, assignments, bids, hours, fees. Everything's being arranged quickly and flexibly. At any rate it doesn't distract us from what's on the horizon. The real work continues, at Brandhome as well as the N-VA. They're also busy thinking of a conference theme. Conference chairman Ben Weyts has expressed a preference for three avenues in the areas of welfare and well-being:

Change for your welfare
Your welfare – that's what it's about
Your welfare and well-being – that's what it's about

The proposals are part of an e-mail that Piet De Zaeger sends me: "What is the challenge with respect to the slogan for the convention? Opponents (in other political parties, in the media, on social media…) want to put us down as a party that is only concerned with institutional reforms, and not with what "the people" really care about: their job, their pension, their social security, their healthcare. We cannot fall into that trap by letting them call it the N-VA confederalism convention (a complex topic – just Google "Belgian confederalism" and you'll see what I mean). Yes, the N-VA is still "the power of change." But without a specific subtitle for this convention, the media is going to describe it as the "Confederalism conference of the N-VA." I can just see the headlines now. That Piet, he wasn't born yesterday, I think to myself. He's a good strategist. Still, I keep thinking that the media will still try to do it regardless, given their attitude towards the N-VA so far. They can always put a spin on the N-VA message in the direction of confederalism, or division, or the end of Belgium, or whatever instills fear. There are more than enough journalists who would deftly slip it into an article or insidiously weave it into a radio program. Small points are easily scored. The more difficult we can make it for them to put their own spin on the convention, the better. The N-VA party convention must be a mental starting point for the campaign as far as we're concerned. With the guidelines and the image with which we will enter the elections. That increases the pressure on our team and the N-VA team. Diamonds are stones created under pressure.

Pressure results in overachievement. The proposals thought up by the N-VA for their convention theme are a brave attempt to put what they want into words, but none of them are quite right yet. "Change for your welfare" comes closest. It names something you can agree with: welfare – who doesn't think that's a good thing? At the same time, that makes it too generic, too broad, too accepted, too much of a catchall. Welfare says everything and nothing. It is too all encompassing as a project for the party to strive for it. Building up welfare is work for the whole nation and it can take a time to achieve it. And when is welfare welfare? It is tricky to use welfare as a promise, if you think about it. Welfare can mean something else. After all, it's how you look at it. For Russians, communism was the ultimate in welfare, to give but one example. Change is good, but aren't we exaggerating? At any rate I toss it to the Brandhome group and ask the team to keep thinking about the line "Change for your welfare." It has a nice cadence, which is in itself a precondition for a theme that needs to stick in people's heads. We also feel that the construction of the sentence offers the possibility of framing the idea of change. Change for a better pension, change for making enterprise easier, change for more efficient government. Something like that. Maybe in this way we'll arrive at a multifunctional sentence that can be adapted according to need and occasion. It would be useful to have a line we could fill in as needed, precisely because the N-VA has so many points in its election program – all of which serve the interests of reform and change. We keep thinking.

I have the feeling that we're getting close; it's a question of finding the right word that gives change an ideal meaning AND makes the theme exciting AND coincides with a relevant, ironclad election campaign image. Like our V. We're continuing to experiment with that V. Visual sketches range from the V as stylized "check" in the right box on an election form to a photograph of children's fingers making the victory sign. They cover the walls and we're hanging new ones every day. As a team we see the most potential in the human V-sign. Whether it's been done before or not, we see that it can really work for a campaign that has change as its core message. It is graphically strong, it is iconic, it is human, it is binding. What more do you want? Oh yeah – that stupid line that we still don't have. Irritating, but that will make it all the more satisfying when we do have it.

Between the acts, someone from our team has nevertheless decided to withdraw from the N-VA project. Reason: a heavy conscience about working with the N-VA and reactions from the personal milieu didn't help. Better late than never? That doesn't fly. Should have thought it over more carefully and not started in the first place. This is not professional. Now we're up and running and losing some of our brainpower. I can understand the decision itself, it's more the way it was delivered and the bad timing that bother me. It leads me to ask the other team members what they think about it. The rest remain clear-eyed and calm. They are professional. Nevertheless they expect

that when people around them know that they're working for the N-VA, they won't exactly get a standing ovation. They feel the force of the antipathy generated by the press and political opponents of the N-VA. As far as that's concerned, my people notice the difference between what we're doing and working for a "regular" brand. But it makes them sharper, and me too. But still it's strange. Because why shouldn't you just do your work professionally for a political party with other ideas than those of the established order? Whatever. The general atmosphere is that we ignore it and just keep going.

Business as usual. Where is that line, guys?

In the meantime, there's a document from a trendsetting research agency on my desk. They have done a study for the N-VA. It unveils a classic market segmentation of marketing and communication target groups. All of it undoubtedly expert, but on each page – and there are quite a few – you encounter another open door. This is the vision of segmentation that is sold to every party. No wonder you see so many parties doing the same thing. If you think in terms of such classic ideas, you will never travel other, newer paths. There are at least four myths concerning this kind of market segmentation. They're too pretty not to puncture, so if you have a moment, here we go:

Myth 1: Market segments enable businesses to have insight into the market as a whole.

That ignores the reality that everything is much more fluid today than ever before. Economic circumstances, desires and consumer preferences, and complete markets now evolve at breakneck speed. Separate market segments never tell the whole story.

Myth 2: Market segmentation helps businesses understand their clients better.

Forget it. Segmentation is just a way of aiming products at consumers. It provides you with marketing data, not with insights into consumer behavior or emotion. For the latter, you have to step outside your office for a moment and wander around in your target markets.

Myth 3: Market segmentation helps businesses bond with their clients.

To do that you have to learn to understand them first. "People don't by for logical reasons. They buy for emotional reasons," said Zig Ziglar, one of the best sales gurus of the United States. Market segmentation maps out target groups, but that's all.

Myth 4: Market segmentation works as good for businesses in 2015 as it did in 1985.

Keep dreaming. In 1985, all people wanted to do was buy, buy, buy. Today and in 2015 they want to get value out of their experiences.

For me the research report is an occasion for explaining to Piet our ideas about how to do things differently. At Brandhome we believe in mindset segmentation. This doesn't proceed from purchase profiles, rational data, target group definition and the two-dimensional relationship client-product, as classic market segmentation does. Mindset segmentation adds emotional data to the rational data, proceeds from personality profiles and from the three-dimensional relationship client-values-product. At its core it boils down to a more empathetic approach to the market. People are no longer defined here as consumers in wealth class AB+, upwardly mobile early adopters with one point five children and a purebred dog. Mindset segmentation zooms in on what moves people, what they find interesting, what values motivate them, what opinions they have, what experiences they pursue and whether they share them with others. And so on. In this model people are no longer a market area, where you as a business can just throw your products at the door. The world doesn't work that way anymore. People look for connection, a story to share with others. Mindset segmentation is going to help us a lot in finding out what connections we can establish between the N-VA story and the people with the mindset, let us say, to listen

to it. It can scarcely be assumed that people will vote for a party out of rational considerations – certainly not if the outcome, and the government that comes out of it, is so incredibly unpredictable as it is in a country like Belgium. Yes, citizens are perfectly capable of rationalizing why they are for socialism or more capitalism or green politics. On that level it works just like when someone buys a new BMW simply because they think it's a sturdy car. "If you're on the road as much as I am, you have to have a comfortable, fast, reliable car." Emotion – it may be an unacknowledged taboo; people don't like to own up to it. There is always a kind of embarrassment about admitting that you chose something on the basis of a gut feeling. Who's going to do a study on that?

Something tells me that this, too, has to be a strategic component of the whole process by which we develop the campaign. It is another way of looking at the voters in this country and that's necessary. We are facing the gargantuan task of providing the N-VA with a campaign that will have to withstand attacks from all sides. The ideal scenario is that the campaign in one way or another creates so many supporters and adherents that this starts functioning as a block against which all criticism shatters. A unified N-VA mindset community, as it were, that is able, from the bottom up and especially in social media, to form a counterweight to all manner of minor or rougher forms of denigrating commentary. Let's think back for a moment to the first Obama campaign: when there was even a

separate *Fight the Smears* website set up online to debunk all kinds of allegations (Obama is Muslim, Obama is not a citizen of the United States, etc.). The site provided tens of millions of online Obama followers – most of them young – with arguments they could spread. It really helped discredit the smears. In the case of Belgium, such a website doesn't really seem necessary. The idea of mobilizing a sort of "N-VA mindset movement" looks more interesting. If we really want to do things differently, then something like this is worth further consideration. Let's not forget that the world is online. If changing a country has to start somewhere, it's there. You can't halt progress – especially not if it starts to catch on in social media. Just look at the Arabic Spring. It started with a Facebook post… and the rest is history.

Progress. Did I just say progress?

5.
PROGRESS IN THE MAKING

In our collaboration with the N-VA we use Skype quite often for meetings. Our agendas are often too crowded and you can do a lot via e-mail, but getting the heads together live is necessary now and then to discuss opinions and visions quickly. On a rainy evening we meet digitally again during an extended Skype call: Nele, Piet, and from our side Alec, Jef and me. While one after the other signs on, Piet remarks on the progress we've made with all these online meetings. It took some getting used to in the beginning, but in the meantime it feels just as normal as actually sitting together around the table. I've always been a big advocate of online meetings. Sensibly used and adapted, it saves so much time and makes decisions so much faster than always getting in the car and braving traffic to get to the meeting room. "Yeah, that's progress – you can't stop it, not even in Belgium. Maybe we should try something like that with the N-VA," I see and hear Piet saying with a smile. The simplest solutions are always lying right under our noses. You should have seen them, but usually you overlook them. Not tonight, apparently. The concept of progress suddenly takes over the whole Skype meeting. Change, progress, they're like brother and sister. That we've overlooked it till now, you ask yourself. How simple could it be? Logical: you don't strive for change in order to go backward. Change is there to break through the status quo and improve what already exists. Change is something you do to make progress. That both concepts begin with a "V" in Dutch – it can't be just a coincidence. It is still not a 100% eureka moment, but the predominant feeling within the N-VA and

the Brandhome team is that with "progress" we've suddenly found another missing piece of the puzzle. Sculpting away at the key line for the party convention and election campaign now begins to yield a more concrete shape. Progress brings a whole laundry list of associations with it. It's positive, it's dynamic, it's daring. Most interestingly of all, it provides an answer to the question that voters can ask the N-VA: "what's in it for me?" Change alone isn't enough. Changing or wanting to change the way things are does not automatically mean that everything will get better. Change is not by definition improvement. Add progress to the mix and you get a much clearer promise and above all a promise that is more their own. Suddenly the N-VA is not only the party that wants to reform everything for the sake of reform. Reform is now furnished with a well-defined goal: to bring progress. Progress in all things great and small. Social, cultural, societal, economic… on every possible level of society where things need to be different, that can now be explained and argued more easily. Progress – we should have seen it sooner. Now to find the right order.

We shift into high gear. Joris joins the team. Joris is a Dutch colleague who lived in Antwerp for years and worked for Brandhome. He still works for Brandhome, but not in Antwerp. Two years ago he moved back to the Netherlands with his whole family. Near the Achterhoek, around Twente, where his roots are. But distance means nothing. Thanks to Skype, Facetime, Google Hangout, e-mail and chat, he

still works with us just as well as if he were sitting here in the office. *If* were in the office, because Jef, Alec, Sas and I, we're always running around in Belgium and abroad to see clients. The new technologies keep us together. We started doing it years ago, when we were helping a client in the Netherlands with their project "the New Digital Workplace." We learned a lot through that. And right away we decided there was no holding back change, and that we should embrace it ourselves. No sooner said than done. It took some time to learn to work with it, but it was worth it. An agency that still has a small army of people running around its halls: I don't understand it. The world is online: use it! Stay compact, flexible and effective. Work on a project-by-project basis, remote, and with outside specialists. For us this is an ideal way of working; it enables us to accomplish a hell of a lot, and fast. What's good about Joris is that he's a highly conceptual thinker who can look further than the pretty picture in front of him. He can do the latter like nobody's business, but that comes later. First the concept has to be right, verbally and visually. We're not there yet. Joris, Jef and I pick up the puzzle, including the new combination "change-progress" in order to put a few raw scenarios together as quickly as possible. Then we can see whether the feel of our newly discovered concept of progress isn't deceiving us. We start with the suggestions proposed by the N-VA – namely, "Change for your welfare." No shortage of egos here, but even so we don't suffer from *not invented here syndrome*. If it's good, it's good. If their line turns out to be better than anything we came up with,

then so be it. For me it's always about the best solution. Where it comes from or who thought of it interests me very little or not at all.

One of my bad habits is that I can never resist making little sketches, which I throw on top of everything else that is already on the table for the creative boys and girls. Do they like it? At first not at all, but they're learning. They know in the meantime that it isn't about creative incursions on my part. I always start from strategy, so now I also have three different angles sketched out on paper in crooked pencil lines. Although it's true that the V, change and progress are strong points of departure, I want to see whether there aren't other options. Is there, besides the V, another graphic image imaginable that can grow into a serviceable communication property? Don't we have to try and let go of everything and start thinking in a totally different way about the symbolism surrounding change? We only have one chance, and I don't want us to overlook anything. No stone left unturned, every path tried. That is what Brandhome sells its clients: a good night's sleep! The comfort that when you ask Brandhome to collaborate on a project, we go to the absolute limit so that you as a client have maximum certainty that what we propose is really going to work. That's what my rudimentary sketches are all about. Later it puts the creative angles in perspective visually for Piet and the other members of the N-VA communications team. That helps with the evaluation process. I've always found that it's very difficult for people to stick to the strategy at hand as soon as we've

reached what I somewhat disrespectfully call the "pretty picture" stage. We humans like to say we are rational, thinking beings. In practice, however, we are inclined to fall in love dangerously fast with images that look attractive and evoke pleasant associations. All that can be taken into account, but it can also be blinding and lead to a choice that, strictly speaking, is not 100% in line with the brand's strategic promise. Emotion is just like a wild horse. Exciting to ride, but only after taming and reining in – otherwise it will carry you off into the prairie.

I don't have to say any of this to our team. We've been down this way before. In addition to a healthy dose of creative enthusiasm, we're also blessed with a practical disposition. In the coming days more and more solutions, ideas and plans pile up on the table. We're headed in the right direction. We're weeding out the real weeds: in such a thought process you also have to write nonsense, because who knows – it may turn out to be brilliant. What remains is the yield we will take to the N-VA. That's not to say that we think everything is just as good as the rest – on the contrary. Rather, it's because we want to arrive at a unanimous choice together, and share the same feeling about a slogan. That sounds like a lot of Dutch blah blah, but it's nothing like that. Blah blah means making compromises. We can't afford compromises here.

The N-VA, and its convictions, are too outspoken to provide with a half-hearted line that everyone can agree with. That will get you nowhere. "Dare" is part of the N-VA log, along with "Think" and "Do," and you have to see these things in the campaign slogan as well. Knowing the folks at the N-VA, in the meantime, I think that they will see it for themselves in the range of ideas we present. What I mean is, in the same material we have already spiritually embraced. There's one in there that stands head and shoulders above the rest. Simplicity itself, as it always is with good themes, but everything's in there: the right feeling, the brand promise, positive attitude, challenge, daring, clarity. Best of all is that we see that it coincides with the image that's already been keeping us preoccupied for a while now. It's one of those lines that make you think: why didn't we think of it sooner? But wisdom always comes with hindsight. For history's sake, though, it's nice to see what was still in the line-up after the reviews:

Change for your welfare.
Your welfare, that's what it's about.
Your welfare and well-being, that's what it's about.
From change to progress.
Change (n.) for progress.
Change (v.) for progress.
Change. Improvement. Progress.

To Change. To Improve. To Progress.
Change. Improve. Progress.
Changing, improving, progressing together.
Changing together, together making progress.
Your welfare, that's where it begins.
More welfare with change.
Together for change.
More change.
More change together.
Change for welfare.
Stronger through change.
Progress through change.
Go further with change.
Change in thinking, progress in doing.

A lot of conjuring with words. It always comes down to that if you have reached the stage where you know what you want to say, but that one strong translation of it just won't come. That can really get on your nerves, especially as the deadline is rapidly drawing near. It's important not to give in to the feeling of despair that starts to raise its ugly head. *Failure is not an option* – that attitude once saved the crew of the Apollo 13 from certain death in space. I don't want to compare coming up with an appropriate campaign slogan to a NASA rescue operation in space, but you have to work on it with the same attitude. The inclination to give up is always there if you've been working on

something so intensely and it just doesn't want to work. That's where mediocrity comes from, making the easy choice, "just" choosing the least of all evils. Ok, right? Wrong. That won't help you. Not in a world that's hurdling forward at lightning speed. Mediocrity passes like a fart in the night: it stinks for a moment, but it doesn't last. That's the last thing you should want. I don't understand a lot of advertisers and advertising agencies. That they are so often satisfied with mediocrity or worse; I just don't get it. How do they get clients: "Work with us, here you'll get the best mediocrity that money can buy"? It's a mystery to me. It should be a matter of honor not to let laziness win over ambition.

Change for Progress. That's going to be the one. As far as I'm concerned there's no longer any room for doubt. Not only is the line everything you could hope for in a campaign slogan, but the first visual version shows how splendidly it coincides with the V-sign – in Dutch anyway: "Verandering voor Vooruitgang." Slogan and V-sign are made for each other, so it seems. The one reinforces the other and the other reinforces the one. That's how it should be; this is what we were looking for. Change for Progress is the essence of everything the N-VA has in itself and wants to communicate. The hand with the V-sign provided with an exclamation point. Yes, it's been used before, but it's relevant here and characteristic of the N-VA. The fingers that make the V will ensure that the theme is stored very quickly in the mind of the voter. In the tangle of political messages

that we can expect, that already gives us a huge advantage. As a rule, campaigns for brands and products need a bit of time to burrow into people's brains – let alone their emotions. We don't have that kind of time. An election campaign is an extended sprint to the finish. It is nearly impossible to pull off, but actually, on the very day a party launches its campaign, a compelling image already has to be burned into the voter's retina. Building up slowly? Forget it. A direct blow is the message. Or as they say in the US, *throw the bomb on the first day of the war!* What I see in the first attempts at visuals tells me, even in the initial raw state, that the N-VA is going to succeed with this. I'm convinced; now the N-VA has to be convinced. But I would be surprised if they didn't pick it up, given their fairly sensitive antennae for communication that can make the difference.

In the final elaboration setting all possibilities out in a row, we are nevertheless able to let go of making a definitive mental choice in favor of Change for Progress. The various avenues are worked out in three communication platforms: in addition to the concept of change with a V, there is also an approach in which the color yellow – the party's own – is the unifying theme and another in which welfare is central. In every case we have cast our nets as wide as possible. This is necessary because at the moment we still don't know how and in which media we'll end up, and that isn't important right now. But for ourselves, and for the people at N-VA, there has to be a clear feeling that a concept will hold its own in all possible media.

This is what I call the "plausibility stage." The same way Ikea tests its kitchen cabinet doors, we test the most divergent types of media. A good concept even communicates on a packet of sugar. Concepts that are only good on TV and that otherwise cause problems in other kinds of communication channels – those you can forget about before you even get started. It's nothing short of a disaster when you only discover halfway that what looked like a nice concept on paper is not actually nice in practice.

So far, so good. The presentation is ready. The platforms are clear. They're so clear that Piet and the rest of the N-VA team don't need long to see the value of the communication platform Progress. Which is also logical. In fact, Piet and his team, in consultation with Ben, Bart and the rest of the executive committee, thought of it themselves. At Brandhome we just took it apart, deepened it, broadened it. In fact it is always like this with brands that have a strong heritage. You dissect them, and along the way you find the diamond as a matter of course. A lot of things still need fine-tuning, but there is no doubt about Change for Progress as the load-bearing message, including the V-sign. As Piet will say: "One of the reasons this is so strong is because it places us exactly opposite the old Belgian political model of the PS (French-speaking socialists). It makes us even more "the new," and them even more "the old." We want to change; they want to preserve. We want to innovate; they want to continue in the old-fashioned way. Strategically that's the way we

want to go anyway in the coming months. That opposition creates clarity and clarity's what you can't have enough of." Good. So now we know what we're going to concentrate on. We now continue to work on increasingly concrete ways to give shape to the campaign on the basis of Change for Progress. It can't just remain a slogan – we have to make sure that we are able to bring the line to life using all the different points in the election program. How you handle that. It's not for nothing that we imposed on ourselves the decision to make it all about content. Otherwise it would be too easy for opponents to dismiss the N-VA as – to put it crudely – the Belgium-splitters. Together with the N-VA we'll still have to search for a number of promises that will be able to bear the brunt of the campaign's weight. At least, at this moment that's what we think we'll have to do. The budget's not made of elastic. You can't say everything you want to say. Unless we stumble on an idea that allows us to do exactly that. We're not there yet.

What we at any rate do very quickly is see whether the slogan Change for Progress is already being or has been used. It should happen to you as the N-VA – you open all the stops with a slogan and only later discover that, somewhere in the country, someone or something is already using it. That would be another tasty tidbit for the media – free of charge. As soon as we ask the question, it's answered: there's no trace of the slogan as we know it. And so just as quickly we have it registered. It's ours.

Immediately afterward I have Alec register all the domain names, from changeforprogress.be to changingforprogress.net – as well as all the similar sounding media handles on Facebook, Twitter and the rest… I don't have to explain it to Alec. He knows the tricks of the trade. Registering and blocking domain names are preemptive steps that I always recommend and always carry out if possible. Our Brandhome method® is set up so as not to forget important legal aspects in marketing and communication. That makes us different. That distinguishes Brandhome from the rest of the market. Eliminate all chances that others will in one way or another come between you and your campaign. All it takes is just a little sand in the gears to bring the entire machinery to a standstill. It costs surprisingly little to register them and slogans, and to make a broad collection of domain names inaccessible for whomever. Always do it. No one will be able to touch them. Then you can go full steam ahead. Like we're doing now.

6.
THE COMMITMENTS

Does the N-VA revolve around Bart De Wever?

No, of course not, it has a full complement of committed staffers. What is true is that you can't get past the fact that Bart is the absolute front man, the figurehead of the party. As personification of the party, he has the spotlights pointed at him and I often ask myself what that must be like. Every now and then I'm standing in front of a full house at a conference to tell the Brandhome story and there's always a bit of nervous perspiration. Now translate that into the situation of Bart De Wever. Not only is he followed by journalists, photographers and film crews, his every word – literally – is weighed in the balance. Every day. Already, today. I can't imagine what it's going to be like in the coming months. It is moreover one thing to be followed; it's quite another to realize that there are a lot of people who have a vested interest in taking even a minor blunder and enlarging it to mammoth proportions. The N-VA threatens the status quo and there's nothing more dangerous than that. How anyone can remain calm in a climate like that, as Bart does, is beyond me. You would think and maybe even expect that at a certain point a kind of doggedness or even bitterness might break through with someone in his position. But as far as I can tell, it doesn't. It surprises Piet as well, and at the same time it doesn't: "Bart's strength is that he is really good at putting things in perspective, and that he knows exactly what he's doing. He doesn't allow himself to be distracted from the final goal, and all the rubbish that gets thrown at him just rolls

right off like water from a duck's back. He makes a joke about it and that's that."

During preparations for the beginning of the campaign I see Bart again when we have a meeting at the Antwerp city hall on November 27, 2013. When I show up at reception I get a few looks on account of my appearance; I have long hair, and sometimes I wear it in a bun, sometimes loose. That day I hear myself announced as: "…there's some Indian here for the mayor, a certain Saelens…" The Indian may pass. Jef is with me, and he adds fuel to the fire: "Indian? Bum is more like it!" Such nice ladies they have at the city hall reception desk. They have a sense of humor, and I like that. If you ask me, you also need it if you work there. Every day they see a lot, I think. In his office on the second floor – known as the Schoon Verdiep, after the *piano nobile* of the Renaissance palazzos on which Antwerp's city hall was modeled – Piet, Ben and Bart are already mid-meeting. It is and always will be an impressive room, the mayor's office. It exudes history, on the one hand, but when you see Bart at work it exudes a sense of the future as well. Crazy. While Bart and Piet leave the meeting for a moment, Jef, Ben and I look at the mayor's "trophy cabinet." This is a cabinet full of all manner of objects and gifts that the mayor of a large city like Antwerp receives from different groups of inhabitants. With all their various habits and customs and everything associated with them. Ben explains what's what. Exciting stuff. A kind of mini-museum slash tour of the mayor's office.

There's even a special step so that the mayor can climb onto his balcony. In the meantime Bart and Piet have come back into the office. Bart sits down and gets right to the point, because our meeting has had to be shortened. Later that day it will become apparent why: on that day the auditor of the Council of State had requested that the government guarantee for Arco shareholders be eliminated. In less than two minutes time, Bart and Ben explain with surgical precision the essence of what they see and want to see in the theme Change for Progress. And what they expect from communications. At that moment Liesbeth Homans walks in the door unexpectedly. Bart: "Liesbeth, look what we have here on the table. What do you think?" Liesbeth digs around through everything lying on the table. She thinks for a moment and says: "Real people. You need real people. The people 'behind' and 'in' the man and woman that you see. You need sincere, emotional depth." For a layman it might sound strange, but for people in the field like Jef and I, it was crystal clear. What Liesbeth meant was that we shouldn't forget deep, human emotion. Point taken. It often happens in our field that the female touch puts things in focus. For us it was all clear. Pack up and go. We know what we need to know.

In the meantime a lot has happened since we decided that the line Change for Progress would lead the campaign. In recent weeks there have been more, new blanks exercises have been made on the basis of the chosen theme. The feeling is that we're almost there, but

that something's still missing. I have the idea that we're working in a way that's too ordinary. Too orthodox is maybe a better way of saying it. Everything looks too polite, goody-goody even. If this is what it's going to be, it's nice and neat and there's nothing wrong with it. But to me it doesn't seem like enough to win the war. We've got the V-sign down pat. It is clear that it will be able to serve as a gesture that will be made by every politician that is actively involved in the regional or federal elections. And the gesture can also become that of the people we show making pronouncements about points in the election program. Change for Progress ultimately has to be communicated from the top down as well as from the bottom up. One of the V-sign's greatest strengths is that is highly binding when used in this way. It works between people in kind of the same way as when motorcycle riders give each other a sign when they meet on the road. Perfect strangers, but connected by their motorcycles. It brings understanding ("verstandhouding" in Dutch – again with a V – it never stops). Its value is not to be underestimated. The times we're living in now are increasingly dominated by the desire to share our lives with each other. Experiences, opinions, convictions, points of view, visions – you see more and more that people are looking for other, likeminded people for a warm bath in community feeling. Without exaggerating, we think that for this reason more than anything else, the V-sign can play a role as a representative or symbol of the feeling we want to give the N-VA. The goal is to make the N-VA more acceptable to people, to bring them closer much more

quickly. Such a simple gesture has a disarming effect. For a political party it definitely has an element of fun as well, something you don't expect in a hotly contested election battle. And above all not as the central image of the campaign. You can joke about it, which is certainly going to happen – I'll bet money on it. Well fine. Let everybody do their best with it. When it happens, you'll know for sure that the symbol has landed and unleashed something. The same thing will also happen with the slogan. It won't be long before people also start unleashing their sense of humor on Change for Progress, with or without the V-sign. That too will be a signal that the campaign has succeeded in making something happen in this country.

There have been internal discussions about eventually pre-testing the campaign prior to the elections. Given the lack of time, this will be difficult. Moreover, I think: the market is the test in cases like these. It is very difficult to test a political campaign. It's not a TV commercial for a brand of coffee or a hamburger chain that involves a simple, testable message. A political party is a complex tissue of ideas and visions, human factors (the party leader and candidates), an entire election program, prejudices and media influence. Just try testing a campaign. The themes and the gesture, that might still work, but even that would have to be quick & dirty. A sample test. That might still yield interesting feedback. But research costs money, costs time, and in both areas we need to be thrifty. Do we all believe

in the campaign, yes or no? That is the only question that counts. We answered that question long ago and in full with a big, fat YES. What it's about now is how we can use the campaign strategically and in terms of media strategy in order to generate maximum effect. We're still wrestling with the problem of the election program. Not as an election program per se, but because of the number of promises involved. There's a lot. It couldn't be otherwise – at election time a party has to have an answer to everything and an opinion about as little as possible. Can we give them all room? And how can we do that except in a book, a pamphlet, or blocks of text on a website that are way too big? An election program isn't there for the journalists; it's there to give ordinary people what they want to know before they vote. Political editors of newspapers, periodicals, radio and television programs will go over it with a magnifying glass, regardless of how extensive it is. The average voter is looking forward and forms his or her own opinion. Although influence should never be underestimated – certainly not propaganda, a weapon that opponents will certainly use. Reading is no longer the favorite pastime of contemporary people, to put it mildly.

We're starting to get the feeling – ever since we began working on the slogan and the V-sign – that we will have to take an equally unorthodox approach to the election program and everything in it. To look at it purely from the point of view of the voter, the citizen, the ordinary man or woman. The person who is no longer

sitting with his or her nose in newspapers and periodicals, but with a smartphone among friends and acquaintances on Facebook and Twitter. Would it be possible to build a bridge between something dull like an election program and the online life of the modern citizen? An essential question, to which we must find an answer. The content, the content, the content – it has to be about the content, we swore to ourselves. So a way has to be found not to push that content on people, but to lead them to it, to show them what the N-VA has to say and what the N-VA is really about: we want to make that so interesting that people form the desire to discover it for themselves. Now all we have to do is figure out how. *Any ideas? Anyone?*

Sitting face to face with Bart De Wever again, I realize that he is now more than ever living proof of his party's own slogan, Change for Progress. His incredible transformation shows that even change that almost seems impossible can be brought about. Just try losing around 130 lbs. Go put 130 lbs. of butter in your shopping cart, then you'll know how much it is. How much strength do you have to have within yourself to accomplish something like that? Most of us mortals hardly succeed in losing ten pounds (pounds that usually come back quickly, with interest). How striking, that his personal efforts coincide with the slogan that came out of the pipeline to contribute to his party's election victory. I've already mentioned it in passing a few times in the pages that came before: it looks like chance, but I don't believe in chance. Nor am I religious, or I might start to

think it was preordained. The strategist in me sits up and takes note: should we perhaps do something with Bart's dieting victory for the campaign? It's tempting. In the States there would definitely use it at election time; there would certainly be a role for it to play. The cult of personality is bigger over there. If Obama would go from more than 300 lbs. to the way he is now, it would certainly be used to the sound of clarion calls in order to underscore his message of *change*. In a typically American way, in a TV commercial, we would see a fat Obama melting away layer by layer until he morphed into a thin Obama. The image would be accompanied by a compassionate voiceover typical of election campaigns: *"See what change can do… if you want."*

Here in Belgium we had better not even start, I think. The person De Wever already unleashes enough in this country, and his successful weight-loss campaign has already gotten more than enough publicity. To start it up all over again in the context of an election slogan would be too much of a good thing. As a human example of change that everyone can recognize and identify with, it's spot on. But as a message with content, it falls short. The sheer number of items that the campaign will have to carry would cause it to implode. It would be too much about what's on the outside and not enough about what's on the inside. I bury the thought along with other rejected ideas. I have a lot of them.

Wrestling with the election promises keeps us busy, however. What we're looking for is a distinctive and yet also catchy name for the items on the program. We do not want to fall in the traditional trap of giving the election program a motto that you've already forgotten after the press conference is over. "Thinking ahead sustainably" or "Working for change" or "Recharging for change." Brrrr. Not. Of course now there's Change for Progress, which we've already embraced, but in this specific case something has to go with it, or at least under it. Our ambition of not pushing the election promises on people but letting them seek them out for themselves demands an extra concept. The election promises need another name. Here too we want a name that will be the N-VA's own – this is a must, not a wish – the content of which has to function as a bridge between the message of change and the voter, whether he or she is already an adherent or still in doubt.

Sander and Joachim from the N-VA and Jef and I get together again to think about it. More brainstorming. It is unspeakably important because it determines everything about how we will communicate one thing and another. We've already established that we will have to speak the language of ordinary people – not political language with all that parliamentary jargon. We can't afford that, not even by accident. In the mass media we want to speak in one-liners as much as possible, and in the other media we plan to use short, simple texts. That should be our tone, as the largest political brand in Flanders

and Belgium, an A-brand that doesn't talk over people's heads, but talks to them and in a way they understand. By this point we have reduced our target groups to the essential: our target group is simply every potential voter in this country. Not because it's mathematically necessary to come out above 30% of the votes. But more because a message of change and progress rightly touches everyone. The N-VA is not the party that only wants to help workers get ahead. The N-VA is not the party that only wants to help entrepreneurs get ahead. Or only students, the aged, the police, the foster mothers, those entitled to welfare, the adherents of confederalism, etc. The N-VA has no socialist background, no Christian background, no green background, no compartmentalization along socio-political lines. The party is not an advocate of particular interest groups. Certainly, it has a Flemish background; that cannot be denied. But if you look closely, you will see the difference between a party that wants "Flanders on top" and a party that wants to maximize the socio-economic potential of Flanders for the common good. I understand Bart perfectly when he says that Flanders and Wallonia actually get in each other's way, like two neighbors that have little in common and don't want to listen to each other, but unfortunately can't move out. The strangled embrace that results ensures that neither can make progress. This generates more damage daily for every single person in this country, something that politicians – certainly everyone in Belgian politics – should be ashamed of. It is precisely this situation more than anything else

that has to change. The N-VA is convinced that this change will have to come from Flanders, since Flanders is after all the economic motor of the country. In recent years the Flemish government has indeed succeeded in taking steps in the right direction. What can the average man or woman on the street have against trying it out on a federal level as well? Without the N-VA it will never happen. Hence, the importance for the N-VA of communicating as clearly, broadly and appealingly as possible. The political promises must not be translated into anything other than promises that every person can apply to him- or herself. Such as: I see confederalism as a solution, because I want to see things changed. Or: I want to get ahead in life, so I'm voting N-VA because they want to create more jobs. Or: I want to be able to wander the streets at night in safety, and the N-VA will make sure I can. And so on. We will work it out promise by promise. Only in this way can you connect them. As a voter you have to really feel that the N-VA means every individual promise 100%. Too many election programs are full of politely formulated filler. Parties focus on the main points, but feel obliged to mention in addition all kinds of things that only play a marginal role. Just another consequence of classic target group thinking: "Let's not forget to put in something about sustainability … then we will have satisfied all those environmentalists." That yields up the kind of obligatory standpoints that are always politically correct, but totally empty in terms of content. Gratuitous stupidity. Stay away if you're

the N-VA. Only write what you mean, what you as a party will uphold 100%.

And then the penny drops.

"What if we don't call them election promises, but Commitments? Because isn't a commitment much more than a promise? Won't that feel like a sort of pact between party and people?" Damn. Commitments. In Dutch "Verbintenissen" – yet another V. Yet another concept that connects organically to the V-sign. Raising a hand with two fingers is also something you do when swearing an oath, something you do if you make a solemn promise. It also takes place in public, where everyone can see it, and you can therefore count on it later. Commitments. That's it – that's what it will be. Suddenly the rest doesn't look so difficult any more. We had already arranged the election promises in five clusters corresponding to the most urgent social challenges. If we look at all the proposed promises with a critical eye – "do we really mean that or is it just superfluous drivel?" – we come out with five promises per cluster that you could justifiably call Commitments.

When I come back into the meeting room the next day I still see the triumphant announcement on the flip-over: 25 Commitments for Change, 25 Commitments for Progress. All scribbled by

Sander, Joachim, Jef and me. We filled the entire flip-over with our scribbling. We tossed ideas and even ourselves back and forth across the room. And we did a lot of laughing. Humor and a good atmosphere make for positive energy. Positive energy makes a team better. Commitments. What a find. Watertight. Mentally I run through the whole N-VA brand story one more time. That we used the Brandhome method® on the N-VA from the beginning is paying off once again. A straight line actually runs from the brand promise right up to the concept of Commitments. It's like the last piece of the puzzle we'd been looking for. All the ingredients for filling in communication and storytelling concretely have come together. Everything fits, everything works, it is now a question of taking all the promises – sorry, Commitments – in hand and seeing how we can link them to the voters in this country. The concept of Commitments in combination with the V-sign immediately calls to mind TV commercials. I don't like them, which is exactly why it's so unexpected. In our mediumistic age I probably should, but there are too many catches. Money, to give an earthly example. The N-VA is not poor and needy, but they are also not a multinational with an unlimited budget. There is no question of dominating television with N-VA airwaves. Moreover, you can't reach all of Flanders with TV, and there is moreover the question of whether we can get airtime. I have already heard Piet express doubts on this score. But just this once I don't really believe him. A paying advertiser is not going to be refused just because the broadcaster doesn't like the message,

is he? I can't imagine it – but then again, in this surreal country maybe I can. Nevertheless something bothers me about the idea of one or several television commercials. It doesn't feel good. The power of the Commitments – now that we've given them such a perfect name and set them all out in a row – lies largely in their number. In a TV spot, even two messages are too many. That forces us either to choose a single Commitment or to do "something" with the general message Change for Progress. The latter isn't an option as far as I'm concerned. You do something like that if you want to create brand recognition or reinforce brand preference. In this case it doesn't make sense; as a brand the N-VA is known everywhere and preference can only be reinforced and expanded by disseminating information about what the party wants. In short, I think it's a shame to waste money on television. It has to happen some other way. And we have to find another answer pronto. Because now that we've got everything so nicely worked out, I see chances for the N-VA to surprise everyone and get the whole election circus going singlehandedly, catching market, media and political opponents off guard.

INTERMEZZO

Change for Progress
Commitments for Progress

1. Rewarding responsibility
   Make work pay
   Fewer / less taxes
   A warm policy of social solidarity
   Working longer, building up more
   Building up from the bottom up

2. Rights and obligations
   Working together
   Affordable healthcare
   Strong police and effective punishment
   Fair migration without back doors
   Decorous politics

3. Strengthening solidarity
   Well-being through welfare
   Better living conditions
   More job opportunities
   More solidarity
   A warm family policy

4. Less government, more leadership
   A more efficient government
   Fewer rules
   Room for free initiatives
   A simplified government structure
   Reduction of government debt

5. Choosing our future
   Better education
   Fluid mobility
   Thinking sustainably about energy
   A surprising culture
   Innovative thought and action

7.
WE'RE THINKING OF FIFTY SHORT FILMS

Change for Progress cannot be compared with the Holy Grail, but the pleasure of having found it is no less sweet. It is always a good feeling to have in your hands what your gut feeling said was there, what you knew you were close to finding, but that just kept slipping through your fingers. Thinking up ideas and developing them is just like fishing: you feel something nibbling at the bait, but every time you reel it in the hook is empty. The most important thing is that we now have an even stronger focus on what we're going to do in our communication. We fill in some more blanks in the creative briefing for the sake of completion. Because everything we think of in terms of expressions from now on is going to be about Change for Progress. At the moment, we're still proceeding on the assumption that one of the things we have to develop is nevertheless going to be a TV commercial. After all, every political campaign we've analyzed in the meantime, from Germany to the US, from Canada to Japan – every one has a TV commercial as a starting shot, as a way of getting across their emotionally charged message, their promise. I still have my doubts, especially where the cost is concerned, but also as to whether it will be effective and able to do justice to the content. Moreover, Belgian law concerning calendar restrictions on political communication before an election is just as vague as the rest of Belgian law. No one can give me a straight answer about when it's allowed and when not. But there's no point yammering about it within the team. That would only be counterproductive. While the creatives are working on all kinds of scripts, are you going to get

underfoot with all your complaining about whether a TV-spot really makes sense? Not what I'd call motivational management. Instead I can better spend my time on the organizational aspects of media use. After all, pretty soon we'll have to buy and reserve media, in whatever shape or form. I think I'll go check things out with the media bureaus.

Media bureaus. For those who are unfamiliar with the term: these are bureaus that purchase media and give advice as to what media will be most effective for what goals. The latter is unfortunately impossible to find without a magnifying glass, because it has everything to do with knowledge and strategic insight into different markets and target groups. It is the true added value of media bureaus. Unfortunately this knowledge has all but evaporated. I know very few media strategists who are worthy of the name, who can surprise me with their strategic insights. The majority are only concerned with meeting their targets and fobbing off all sorts of incomprehensible, expensive proposals on a shrinking market of advertisers. They resemble bankers who try to sell you unfathomable investment derivatives. Exactly what I don't need. What we really need now are experienced strategists who know their field in depth, who know the classic media like TV, radio, billboards, newspapers, magazines, etc., but who also really get the online world. On top of that, they have to understand what we are going to want to do strategically, and it would also be nice of they were trustworthy.

Up to now, every external party we have approached about content has had to sign our NDA (Non Disclosure Agreement), the confidentiality agreement I mentioned earlier. Because we are now about to discuss the media strategy behind the N-VA election campaign, I even want to go a step further. This NDA will have a serious financial damages clause, so that whoever breaks the NDA will know that he or she will have to pay – literally. The plan of attack is as follows: I will call several different media bureaus, ask them to sign the NDA, and only then tell them what it's all about. Then they'll have 24 hours to let us know whether or not they want to collaborate. I know it sounds rather suspicious, but there are all kinds of reasons for it – a lot, but let me give just two here. First, the people I'm going to call are people I've known for years. I know I can trust them, but the question I'm going to ask them could get them in trouble if there's no NDA to back it up. It is also a way of protecting the people and organizations that take part. Later in the week it will also turn out that this was a good move. Second, in order to convince them, I'm going to have to have to reveal the size of the budget. Then they will also know that it's going to be somewhere in the neighborhood of several hundred thousand euros. In terms of current market conditions, that's nothing to sneeze at, certainly not for a media bureau. But I can't afford for one of them to leak the amount I quote them. That would arouse opponents in the market, and I don't want that to happen. I know my pappenheimers, as we like to say in Dutch – I know who I'm dealing with. I've worked

with a lot of Dutch people and if there's one thing I've learned, it's that you not only have to disarm the landmines right in front of you, you also have to remember to plant landmines along the path where you've just been, even if it turns out to be a dead-end. That way you know that no one is going to abuse your trust and/or information afterwards. Persecution complex or a healthy dose of suspicion? It doesn't matter. I have to make maximum use of all the tricks of the trade that I've learned over the years from those who ought to know. Let's get started then. I'll call the first. If the first isn't interested, I'll know within 24 hours, then I can call the second. And so on.

Given that I too have to respect the NDAs that I've signed, I can't really talk that much about what happened. The only thing I can say is that by the end of the week, a number of media bureaus and NDA's later, I hadn't found one single bureau that wanted to work with us. They had all kinds of reasons for not wanting to. Just listen to a few of their motives for saying "no":

"We have a bilingual management team, and that will lead to problems." (many people perceive the N-VA as an anti-francophone party)
"We have a number of government clients and/or clients in the south of the country (i.e., in French-speaking Wallonia – see above), and this will cost us business."
"We've decided that we want to work for another political brand,

because so-and-so person X in that political party is a good friend of person Y in our media bureau."

And so you're left holding the bag. With hundreds of thousands of euros to spend, and nobody who wants to earn it. Throughout the entire week I kept Piet up to date on how things were going. He stays calm. It will be the first time in this project that he says to me: "Erik, we've become hard as rocks from being treated this way." I find that my respect for the N-VA team is growing. These are indeed people who can lead, because you can only lead if you have suffered. It's no coincidence that this is the motto of a number of American companies that have conquered the world. But I'm not giving up. Why should I? Piet's pronouncement has me piqued. If they're so strong, I have to be too. The same evening I go work out at my boxing club in Antwerp. The punching bag is unlucky tonight: I punch all the aggression right out of my body; it clears my head. That evening I decide to try another approach. So long media bureaus. I'm going to call up the television and radio broadcasters myself, person to person. Then I'll know right away whether they can, or whether they may, or whether they dare, and who knows – maybe I'll find out what the competition is doing.

In Flanders you don't have many options if you want to advertise on commercial TV or radio stations. I want to know for sure whether or not we can advertise on TV or the radio. And I also want to know

for sure in the event that we're turned down, that this will also hold true for the other parties.

Because it makes no sense whatsoever to invest even a single euro in producing TV and radio commercials, only to discover that the broadcasters have slammed the door in our face. The game excites me though. I still find it a bizarre thought that a paying advertiser might not be allowed access to TV or radio. Thanksgiving's over and Santa Claus is on the way, but the business world is not so generous in these times of crisis that a TV or radio broadcaster can afford to let income pass them by, it seems to me. And in the meantime political brands all over the world are allowed on radio and TV, so why not in Flanders? Progress and all. I decide this time not to work with NDAs. With a heavy heart and against all my principles, I can't do it differently. I have to place a few necessary landmines. After all, if we work without NDAs, and we're turned down while it later appears that another political brand is allowed paid airtime, we can turn it into an incident. Boom! If there were an NDA involved, this would be more difficult. And everyone on the other side is smart enough to realize that, so you protect those people as well.

Up to now, we as Brandhome have succeeded in keeping the fact that we work for the N-VA under our hat. We always like to keep quiet about all our clients, past and present. I'm just going to ask the TV and radio broadcasters directly: "Hello, we're working for a political

brand in Flanders and we'd like to advertise with your organization before the period of restrictions on political communication begins. How do we do that?" You might call it a straightforward approach. I start making calls. It's December 10, 2013. A quick round, because there aren't that many commercial media firms to call in Flanders. On the face of it I get a lot of pleasant, sympathetic reactions: "Yes, that's an interesting question Erik. No one's ever asked us. But we'll look into it and let you know as soon as possible." How would you handle it, if you were a commercial director in this day and age? A day later I get a phone call that it should be possible. My question is after all whether we can advertise before the restriction period, not during it. The legal departments of the media firms have checked out one thing and another and there don't seem to be any problems. They propose that Brandhome and the potential advertiser (N-VA) make an appointment with the commercial and legal directors of the media firm. When they ask me for which political brand it is, I say it's for the N-VA. There too they don't see any problems. Have I finally found an equally professional partner that understands that a political brand is a brand, and must therefore be allowed the same chances to position and profile itself like any other brand? It seems I have. After some fiddling around, the appointments are noted in the agendas and I decide to see how things stand with public broadcasting. There the answer is clear: no political campaigns on our radio and TV stations. I don't even have to say which political brand is involved. Then you know. The question has been asked

here before, and in recent years more than once. In a way it's understandable. Belgian public broadcasting stands near the top of European public broadcasting, and in addition to a strong reputation for quality, it also has a bad reputation for being a(n) (in)directly politicized institution. No one will say it openly, but everyone in the field secretly thinks so. I've heard it before and read it often in reports by international bureaus for public affairs that give advice to businesses that operate in the Flemish and Belgian markets. With this in mind, I also understand that they must at all costs avoid letting themselves be dragged into that hole. But it's still an odd story. Public broadcasting, whose programs and news shows have the highest concentration of politicians of all broadcasters, would rather not broadcast political messages. Well, we don't need them. We have the appointments with the commercial broadcasters in our agenda. We'll see where we come out. And the question is soon answered: nowhere.

On the morning of the day we have the appointments with commercial broadcasters, one by one they are canceled by secretaries. Internal discussions have taken place. Legal consultation has taken place. It turns out that there are internal guidelines dealing with the broadcast of political messages. There is this. There is that. No doubt! There's something going on, that's clear. Three days later I finally get the department heads on the phone. Their message is clear: the broadcasters have all put their heads together and decided

not to work with us, but no one dares to take the first step. Period. There it is. A week later, with all those euros still in my pocket and no one who wants them. I bring Piet up to date. Once again Piet stays amazingly calm and answers: "Erik, *in der Beschränkung zeigt zich erst der Meister.*" I have a sort of déjà-vu. In all projects and cases in which a brilliant idea has been found that really makes a difference, from the invention of free calling time at BASE to flippos in bags of Smith's chips, they all had one thing in common that proved decisive: extreme limitations. Sometimes financial, sometimes operational, legal, or whatever. Limitation is what drives innovation. Whenever I'm in Berlin I try to visit the museum at Checkpoint Charlie between clients. What people from the former DDR were able to put together using limited means in an attempt to escape… that's what the human mind can do when sufficiently challenged. Computers will never be able to do that… I hope. Limitations push you to your limits. Piet has triggered something in me. Goethe's one-liner has been hurled at me several times in the course of my career. I hear Stan Miller and Guy Schroyen, former executives of KPN and BASE, saying the same thing to me during Christmas vacation 2002. I had just started as interim marketing boss at BASE, and we had to choose between letting BASE go bankrupt and making a turn-around. Brand gasping its last, a failing campaign, incomprehensible positioning, confidence close to null, budget not much higher. Talk about limitations. But the will found a way and the rest is history. Piet and I agree to let everything sink in.

Later it will turn out that the attitude of the media bureaus and the cold feet of the commercial broadcasters were exactly what we needed to limit our way of thinking in order to win the campaign. Without TV, without radio. But that weekend it was still eating away at me. Essentially, a brand was flat-out denied access to Flemish commercial TV and radio. Is it fear or disgust? I think the first more than the second. At least, I hope so. Media firms not wanting to work with us because they don't agree with the N-VA, that comes close to being "repulsive." Surely things haven't gotten that bad in this country? Imagine how far it could go: TV boss doesn't like ketchup and refuses Heinz commercials. I can hear the derisive laughter from here, but as a comparison it's not as absurd as it looks. From the moment a TV broadcaster refuses a respectable, paying advertiser on the grounds of what the broadcaster itself thinks, that's unfair. A subjective decision based on personal convictions or fears. If we see something like that happen in a banana republic, we say here: "Oh, yeah, something like that can happen there." Perhaps Belgium has become a banana republic and none of us have realized it yet. No, after giving it further thought I decide that it's fear at work here. Fear that they will receive negative reactions from their own journalists? Fear that they will receive negative reactions from major advertisers with annoying consequences? At the end of the day, many important advertisers are only companies, with people at the top and sometimes people above them on boards of directors who also have their connections left and right in the spider web that is Belgian

politics. An idea that could make you paranoid, if the idea itself isn't paranoid enough already. I'm disappointed that I'm starting to think this way. I'm disappointed to find out that something like this can happen in this country. We all babble on about innovation here and innovation there, but the bottom line is that this country is a champion in status quo. Take away the EU headquarters in Brussels, abolish fiscal advantages for multinationals, and chase off even more entrepreneurs, academics and young talent, go ahead and finish the job – why not. It says a lot about the advanced state of decay in which the country may be in more than we think. For the first time in my life I ask myself the question I've heard from many clients and fellow entrepreneurs: Do we actually have to stay here? Is there a future here? Is this everything this country has to offer? Is this where I want to end up? Those are questions for later. Right now I have a campaign to win. I notice that I'm angry. Angry because disappointed. The punching bag again? No, tonight's its lucky night – I'm going to bed. Sleep is a good advisor.

The fact is that we won't be able to count on TV and radio to spread the content of the N-VA campaign. It will later turn out to be a blessing that we're not using TV and radio in the traditional way. But I have to admit that this whole business conforms my personal doubts about these traditional media types. Ultimately our goal is getting N-VA a widely visible campaign. "Then we'll have a TV campaign without TV," I think to myself. The emotion of the

moment. Because as I'm saying it, I have no idea what that might be, a TV campaign without TV. It will come. That's what adversity does to you – at any rate to me: it stimulates your competitive drive. I am now completely determined to hit all those invisible adversaries out there twice as hard with the campaign we're going to develop. We're going to win this campaign no matter what it costs. At Brandhome we meet to discuss the new situation. Not so long ago we had presented several discussion documents to the N-VA that we used to evaluate and comment on a number of new avenues and concepts. We already included a couple of TV concepts that we found interesting at the time, but by no means enough to get enthusiastic about. Now that the media component TV is no longer in the picture, we can cast a fresh eye on what we already have and decide what needs to happen. The V is central, the V-sign – you can't get around it, the choice has been made. The 25 Commitments, there we are hard at work formulating them in clear, sharp everyday language. That's a question of endurance, of writing and rewriting, but we're assuming they will be better than good in the end. Of course we're making progress in this area: there are proposals for posters and full-page advertisements in which we connect the commitments to statements by actual people, who are shown making the V-sign. Graphically there's still a lot to discuss and refine, but basically this approach works. They aren't the most creative expressions in the world, but this campaign is also not about winning prizes for the agency, but helping the N-VA win the grand

prize. Effectiveness is priority one. However, these are traditional campaign vehicles and we know they're not going to shake things up. They will certainly contribute to the getting across the content of the messages, and to coupling the election promises to actual human desires. Within the team, we're totally convinced that we have to find some way to get the 25 Commitments into moving pictures. "If we can't get on their TV channels, then we'll get our own YouTube channel," someone cries out. We're going to do that anyway, but the remark reminds me of my own "TV campaign without TV" idea. That YouTube provides the opportunity to make your own channel is great, but that only works if you post a film that's incredibly sensational, high profile or deranged. YouTube is a trap for many advertisers. You'd be surprised how many actually think that every commercial you post will be viewed as many times as the Gangnam video by that crazy Korean.

I usually estimate that 100 hours worth of film clips are uploaded per hour on YouTube. Every minute. Another 100 hours of video. These are numbers that quickly put a damper on advertisers' great expectations. How special does a commercial have to be to have a chance of being seen, let alone going viral? The chance that a political clip has of being talked about around the world is as good as none. YouTube won't disappear from the menu, but by talking about our whole discussion of social media is thrown wide open. Shouldn't we focus more on a campaign that is capable of setting

the most important social media on fire with the N-VA and its Commitments? The nature of social media seems naturally cut out for it. Take Twitter, for example, which is always chock full of opinions; it is a revolving door of human emotion. At the moment you least expect it, a discussion flares up that not only gets people going, but also keeps them busy for a long time. It would really fit the N-VA and its Commitments to get in on this kind of action somehow. Or to give the Flemish Twitterer every chance to cut loose and speak his or her mind using the Commitments. "It sounds good, but then you have to take the sharpest of the sharp Commitments, otherwise it will amount to nothing, so which ones do you take?" is what I hear from Alec and his team. "And don't think that you're going to have many reactions if you let politicians Twitter the Commitments in 140 characters. If you make a spelling mistake, yeah, ok, you can joke about it and then you'll definitely score some retweets," they laugh. That's clear. Twittering politicians, that's no way to let the Commitments shine in the social media. "Why don't we make twenty-five films, testimonials by N-VA members and politicians, each one about a subject connected to a Commitment? But we do it in a way that provokes comment?" Yes, yes, yes. Here we go – there we've got something that sounds like it would really suit the N-VA. "Let's make that fifty films, with not only ordinary people but also a selection of the most well-known N-VA politicians. They're people too, right? And from the moment you let them speak plain language in the same setting, they suddenly become more like

ordinary people than politicians. Anyway the chance is good." It's being said with a smile, but it's all true. The whole idea of making fifty films is exciting. If that works, then those fifty films would be an ideal way, in the earliest stage of the campaign – like a sort of pre-campaign, as I call it – of giving the N-VA the control they need. There are still a few catches, but the idea already looks viable from here. Let's get to work, then, especially on the writing. How the films have to look, who's going to say what, whether we're going to look for these people within the N-VA or outside it – we're at any rate going to make a cautious telephone call to Piet about the idea, and which politicians must, can and will want to participate. "We're thinking of fifty films, Piet" – it won't be an opening line you hear everyday. While we continue to work assiduously on the creative part, Sas, Alec and I pore over the cost and production side of things. Do we have time to produce fifty films, and do we have the money to produce fifty films? It isn't yet clear how they will need to look, but the available amount of time and money already point strongly in the direction of simplicity.

A glance at the planning shows that we have to start shooting, editing and finishing the films – if we're going to use them – sometime around the beginning of January if they're going to be ready by the N-VA convention, which opens on January 31. We will also need time to get them incorporated into the N-VA website. This is another avenue we're working on. The N-VA website will be the hub of the

election campaign. By packaging the Commitments as films, we make it more attractive for voters to go to the website. People are also more inclined to send links to images than links to texts on social media; this is another reason why the fifty films idea is so promising. If we succeed in making them, they will form the core of our online strategy.

A lot is going to depend on it; more than ever, this is going to be the elections in which online opinions and commentary influence voting behavior. It is also my intention to develop an online "cockpit" that will allow us to see from minute to minute how our campaign is developing. Ideally, it should be so clean and quick that it will also be possible to adjust our communication from minute to minute. That's the nice thing about online communication: if you handle it right, you can almost literally watch click behavior, numbers per page, per subject, preferences, sharing behavior, you name it. I'm going to talk about it soon with Tom, someone I've known for nearly fifteen years. Absolutely tops in his field, although I'm not always sure he knows it himself. He's a sort of online nerd, but at the same time not. If you explain to him what the strategy is, he can enrich and improve it. I'm curious if and above all how he will put something like this together in the little time we have. At any rate he hasn't said "no." After the first concise info from my end – political, N-VA, sensitive, reactions possible – the laconic response was: "*Is it dangerous? Is it challenging? Is it fun? Then I'm in.*"

Independent, curious, professionally engaged – that's how it should be if you work in this field.

Sas, who has in the meantime been making the proactive rounds of film production houses and film, photo and sound studios, lets me know that we've gotten nowhere. As soon as they hear that we're making election films for the N-VA, you can practically hear the shutters slamming shut. The cold sweat of fear in the industry drips through the telephone to us. It's becoming hard to work – correction – it *is* hard to work this way. Once again I'm surprised at the lack of professionalism, the lack of ambition and professional pride. It's starting to become time for plan FF: working without Frightened Flemings. The good news is that we've had the chance internally to hatch out a plan as to how we will shoot the films. It will all be very low key, the focus will be on content, about what the speaker has to say. That's hard enough as it is, and all the more so because we won't be dealing with professional actors, but people with no on-camera experience. As you might expect, the twenty-five N-VA politicians are not at all camera shy, but they will have to be careful not to slip back into political language. That's not easy either. To give Piet and his team a fairly accurate idea of the approach we mean to take, we show a film from Angela Merkel's election campaign. From my point of view a bit too sober and maybe even a bit somber, but Angela is not an exuberant personality to begin with. As a basis for our fifty films it gives sufficient points of contact for presenting

the idea to the N-VA and later serving as a briefing for the people who will be responsible for their production. That is, if we can find such people.

Consultation with Piet and his team. "We're thinking of 50 short films" causes in a few raised eyebrows, but they're soon won over to the idea. They see the advantages, especially the value of this approach for an online campaign. "Stay on target" is a favorite saying at Brandhome and that is what the films are really about. We want to deal with content, but in a way that suits the N-VA: fresh, controversial, close to the hearts of ordinary men and women. "Ok, from our side it will be just as much hard work to look find people from all echelons of the party who want to participate. I don't think that will be a problem, but you've already figured it out yourself: it's not easy for just anyone to come out openly for the N-VA. But is that going to work, Erik, getting so many films ready on time? Any idea how much it will cost? When will we have some idea?" Piet remains objective and who's to say he's wrong? In the meantime I'm on the point of leaving the Belgian production market for what it is. We're approaching the last days of December, we've lost enough time on fruitless e-mailing and phoning around, and between Christmas and New Year the world just sort of stands still; it's never the best time to set up a production if you're in a hurry. The good thing is that within the N-VA, all reactions to the slogan Change for Progress have been overwhelmingly positive. The texts for

the convention have already been sent around and of course the line also functions as the theme of the convention. The slogan already lives in the party. Good sign. Campaign themes are always a tricky business. No matter how carefully you choose your words beforehand – and that certainly goes for those within the party who are responsible for communication, such as Piet, his team and the party leaders involved – it can always turn out that your theme raises questions, or even resistance, for whatever reason. Something like this always causes unrest and doubt, things you can definitely do without at this stage. Before you know it gets out by accident and trickles down to one or other newspaper editor who decides to make a big deal of it. "Internal struggles within N-VA," you can almost read the headline now. With an article under it filled with half-truths and misquotes from an unknown but well-informed source. It doesn't always have to be so serious, but there's always a chance that someone will keep harping on it for a while.

Fortunately that's not the case here. All's quiet on the front, the members of the N-VA team are looking forward to the coming new year. The year of truth for the N-VA. Maybe 2014 will be the historic year in which the N-VA takes part in the federal government. The election results will decide everything for the events that come afterward: the formation of a coalition, the negotiations. Only extremely strong results after May 25 will make the N-VA indispensable, impossible to ignore and imperative as part of

the ruling coalition. There is confidence in such a positive outcome, undaunted by what has happened in recent years around and about the N-VA. "The Fleming is a silent avenger," Bart De Wever once told me. "A Fleming can keep quiet for an incredibly long time, as quiet as a mouse, but at a certain moment all that suppressed rage comes out regardless. Then the mouse is transformed into a lion. I think that moment has finally come, that Flemings really want to send a clear message: enough is enough; it can't go on like this any longer. I hope and expect so. It would be great. And still. Then let's see how we're going to take that bastion, because believe me, Erik, even after the elections everything and everyone will be mobilized against us to keep us out of the government, certainly on a federal level."

Truer words were never spoken.

8.
READY, AIM, FIRE

Starting the first week of January we launch plan FF (Frightened Flemings). I have Sas call Rogier, a successful advertising photographer who is devoting himself more and more to directing and film production. He has worked with and for Brandhome on several occasions, is thoroughly trustworthy, professional, fast, flexible and well organized, always working with a small permanent crew. No arrogance, no fast-talking, and coming from an Amsterdammer that means – yes, miracles can happen. The most important question for him is whether he has time. By translating his fantastic knowledge of photography into film production, he managed to avoid the worst of the economic crisis and now that the market is starting to show signs of life again, his agenda could well be full to overflowing. Good guess, because he is indeed in up to his neck in work. Can he shift something around? He'll have a look. In the meantime we've told him it's "only" fifty films. A piece of cake. "Huh, is that all? You're not asking me to do some piddling little job again are you?" Dutch humor. He'll start working on a production schedule and make us an offer, and if we can come to an agreement quickly, it should all work out. The N-VA in the meantime is selecting the people who will appear in front of the camera. That's going well so we don't worry about it. Now the question is whether it will be possible to film everything in a studio in Flanders, or whether we'll have to go to Rogier's studio in the Netherlands. That's not going to be a picnic. It's asking a lot to get people from, say, West Flanders or Limburg to drive to Amsterdam

for a twenty-minute shoot. If we can avoid it, we should. The point is: we should be able to find a studio in Flanders, Brussels, or wherever. And damned if it doesn't turn out the way I feared it would: we're running up against those gutless wonders again. Small film studios, large film studios, photographers' studios, independent studio spaces, even unused banqueting halls: "For the N-VA, you say? Right, right – and that's for when? Ah, no, sorry, we're completely booked, sorry ma'am, goodbye." Sas is not a happy camper during these weeks. Just when we decided to go to Rogier's studio – the mountain going to Muhammad instead of vice versa – there is a flicker of hope on the horizon. In Brussels a space has been found that is large enough and can be soundproofed. Later it will turn out that "soundproof" is a relative concept, but for now we're happy to be able to keep moving forward. It's paradoxical. No studio in Flanders will have us, and then we end up in Brussels. What an adventure. A trip through a war zone with the status quo on all fronts. I see my team and myself changing from this experience. We're growing wiser…

How are things going with the scripts? They exist, but they're not there yet. We still don't have plain language throughout. What Liesbeth Homans said to us – "honest emotional depth" – still isn't prominent enough. The texts still sound too much like party standpoints. The connection between the Commitments, the subject matter, and the link to the theme Change for Progress still needs improvement. What there is, is good enough to start production

with; writing the last words and deleting what's not needed can still be done right up to the moment when someone's sitting in front of the camera. But it's important that we get the whole right. Everyone at the N-VA has to have the feeling beforehand that everything's right, and that's not too much to ask. I ask Jef, who's working on all the scripts, to call Peter. A Dutch copywriter ("by birth," as he himself puts it) who has worked at all the reputable agencies in the Netherlands, ran his own agency, sold it for a tidy sum and moved to Antwerp, where he continued as a freelance. I've known Peter for more than ten years. In 2003 he was part of the Brandhome team that did the rebranding of BASE, and that came up with *Freedom of Speech*. Since then he has worked with us on all kinds of difficult projects. Crazy guy. In the meantime over sixty. He doesn't even have to work. He's earned enough, and he married well. I always tease him about that, which always gets him going. An independent spirit, goes his own way, can sometimes be a cocky bastard, but always knows how to surprise me with his insights. He's one of those rare birds in advertising who works because he likes what he does and is always curious about what's on the next horizon. He even takes it literally, because he's already moved to yet another country – this time to Italy. "Because I can," and that's just the way it is. I call him about the N-VA project and explain how sensitive it is. I'm pretty sure he won't have a problem with it, but it helps to know for sure. Evidently I'm right. "What? Afraid? What am I supposed

to be afraid of? Making campaigns is our business, or am I wrong? Don't be silly!" When I tell him about the fear I've encountered in the media, at production houses, with Flemish freelancers and other auxiliaries, he's just as surprised as I am. "Weird, unprofessional too; what a bunch of cowards." Dutch people rarely beat around the bush and this Dutchman never does. The same day all input about the N-VA campaign goes to him with the request to cast a critical eye on the scripts and elaborate on them further. It has to go fast, but he's used to that from us. I ask him if he can come oversee the shooting if necessary. He has a long list of successful TV commercials to his name. He understands the art of letting a picture do the talking better than anyone in the business. We can really use this expertise for the N-VA shoot. This was already obvious when it became clear to him that it involved fifty films, which had to be shot in only four days. "And they're not actors? Wow, good luck." He made a few mental calculations of how much time you would need per person without having to shoot a lot of expensive overtime: with twenty to thirty minutes tops per person, you were already at the limit. "That's really tight, if you want the texts to come across as believable from people who've never been in front of the camera before. And you don't want to end up having to edit sentence by sentence – then you'll also be at it for a long time." Useful info, except that it doesn't change anything, because we don't have any more time and aren't expecting to get any. What it does make crystal clear is that the texts

have to be written as simply as possible. While the ball is in his court we continue working on the plan for what in my view will be the key to our success: the online campaign.

As far as I'm concerned we're moving away from every form of traditional advertising. It's deadwood. Life is lived on social media; that's where everyone is floating around and it's the "floating" voter we're after – the undecided. The starting point for turning our mission – an electoral victory with more than 30% of the votes – into a reality is maximum reach at a minimum cost. We want the N-VA to dominate the online landscape, rule the media, and in this sense serve as an opinion leader. People have to see, feel and smell the fact that these elections are about the choice between the status quo and Progress. The spirit of change has to be brought to life. Change for Progress is the story that has to connect with voters – a feeling that is getting stronger for us every day. It has to be possible to get all those undecided voters a step higher on the engagement ladder with respect to the N-VA. What better way than by mobilizing the social media? From the inside out and the outside in, from below and from above, from all sides. Other media make it almost impossible – unless for an extraordinarily high cost – to segment so quickly and handily. On the basis of surf and search behavior we are able to approach a highly diverse group of people in highly diverse ways. Online, we can make the message, the vehicle of the message and the call to action more relevant per segment. This is one of our greatest ambitions:

to reach people who might vote for the N-VA – but who aren't yet certain – with those subjects that interest them most. It doesn't make sense to talk to people with a good job about work opportunity. It's a waste of money to talk to retired parents about reforming higher education. Hesitant voters can only be convinced if you can reach them with the things that are important to their individual life, their specific family, their children, their financial situation. That requires a great deal of precision. That is contextual marketing. That's done in the US, I know, but in Flanders it's not. Yet. Good, because that gives us an advantage over the rest. This kind of segmenting cannot be done using traditional media; an advertisement in a magazine is an advertisement in a magazine; a poster on the street corner is a poster on the street corner: already booked, soon pasted up, with a message that speaks to everyone and as a result to no one in particular. Old school advertising that costs a lot and contributes little. Running a campaign online also has the advantage of enabling us to be more careful with the people who wouldn't vote for the N-VA in a thousand years. It is possible to work in such a way that we "annoy" this group as little as possible with N-VA messages that might work like a red cape on a bull – with all the hateful and disturbing responses that result. In this campaign it's not only about swaying undecided voters in favor of the N-VA and strengthening ties with N-VA sympathizers. It is just as important to take into account the strong emotions at work among opponents, who can come up with polemics that throw the whole campaign off balance.

The N-VA is an A-brand and as such has to act like one. It has to determine what's on the agenda, but not with the intention of polarizing opinions. It isn't necessary to go around stoking fires. Others will do that – we don't doubt it for a minute. We are also trying to allow people who are potential partners after the elections to see the party in a different light than they're accustomed to. On both sides of the language boundary – on the Dutch- but also on the French-speaking side of Belgium – the N-VA is depicted as the big boogeyman. We have no illusions that we'll be able to wash the party clean of that image, but inside the N-VA, people are looking across the language boundary with less hostility than is usually assumed. Within the campaign, then, we will clear out a space for messages whose content and argumentation are designed to rectify this boogeyman image somewhat: an "N-VA is ok" idea, or something like that. The chance that it will work: fairly small. But a small chance is still a chance. So let's not forget. In this campaign we don't forget anything, no matter how small, that can help us realize our goal. There is an important role in the social media approach reserved for N-VA members, mandate-holders and sympathizers who can supply their own network with arguments to talk about or pass on to others. We see them as the ambassadors of the N-VA, the advocates of change. The sheer variety of Commitments can be a boon to them, especially if they are all contained in our fifty films. We can't just let everybody go touting from digital door to digital door with a jolly "Vote N-VA" slogan – that's not how it

works. To intrigue, inspire and interest: those are the keywords for our social media approach. To this end we will be supplying all N-VA ambassadors with as much – and as up-to-date – ammunition possible throughout the campaign.

A very different kind of segment: the press and opinion leaders. I have already experienced up close and personal how the media stand with respect to the N-VA. That's going to be fun. One of the biggest problems – and this is fact, not opinion – is that the supposedly objective press is dyed a deeper shade of red than public opinion. As a journalist it's apparently not done – watch out for the euphemism – to be progressive. At any rate, not with respect to the rest of your colleagues. Only if you're a staunch leftist can you be a critical journalist, or at least that's how it seems. I wouldn't be surprised to find out that many a journalist knows deep down in his or her heart that every form of socialism or social democracy ever tried on the face of the planet failed as a model for progress. But it doesn't exactly do wonders for one's career to make such comments within earshot of other journalists – not even after hours over drinks. The same is true, albeit to a lesser extent, of opinion leaders – the columnists and political talk-show hosts. They seem to be light red across the line, politically correct and morally ok. To put it mildly: the N-VA doesn't have a whole lot of friends in the press. One crate of beer and a small living room would be enough to get them all together in one place, with room to spare. But: you can

hardly ignore them. There too we want to tackle the problem using content. We have developed a strategy that is based on a constant and selectively aimed stream of "media snacks." Sometimes small, sometimes larger factoids and news items that are easy to share and are in no way polarized or polarizing in and of themselves. We want to give the press a chance to follow a nuanced story and present it to the public. Whenever possible we will use all kinds of data, even if it comes from or was collected by the competition, to put our own story up for comparison in these small, sound-bite-like media snacks. It will certainly continue to be an unfair fight; the press cannot restrain itself and columnists will continue to write according to the opinions they have been cultivating for years. But here too there is a chance that, all by all, the least negative media will go to the trouble to elucidate the N-VA differently, better, than if we didn't try. A final small but not unimportant element is the use of "media-hack hashtags" – we will launch all kinds of hashtags on Twitter that can be picked up by twitterers to confront people with specific subjects in a surprising way. *Twitter candy*, we call that. Tasty treats for all those restless twitterers whose nature it is to tire quickly of anything that remains the same for longer than a day. It prevents #veranderingvoorvooruitgang – #changeforprogress, for those of you who've already forgotten – from ever going unclicked. Piet and Joachim thought of most of these media snacks. Joachim and his team excelled in slicing and dicing all kinds of stories that were in the pipeline into bite-sized hors-d'oeuvres, which were then gobbled

up by press and social media alike. Ingenious! It was as if they had the ability to predict the media lottery. Within the Brandhome team I was the only one who knew everything that was on the "menu" beforehand. And by everything I mean I knew all the confidential decisions in advance, the final party standpoints, the announcements of who was going to be on the N-VA election lists, when what books were going to be published, which articles were in the pipeline, and so on. Given the extreme sensitivity of the information, I didn't share it with anyone on any of my teams. Why? First, because of the "secret" coding we agreed on, and second because this sort of thing will end up distracting the team. Once we received it from Piet and Joachim, we "chopped" the menu into small snacks, passed it on to our respective teams, and the social media, and all opponents… who did the rest. In every sensitive project on which I've worked – often much less sensitive than this project – there was never such deep trust. It is this deep trust that ensured that everything went at lightning speed and came out top quality. There's that "V" again – in Dutch it could just as well stand for "Vertrouwen" – "Trust."

The N-VA party convention at the end of the month will be the start signal for our pre-campaign. Just because so many members will be present, we want to make them part of the online campaign on the spot. The more active N-VA members are going to be on social media, the faster the campaign will be able to spread. It is at the convention itself that we will encourage people en masse to

like N-VA on Facebook, and we will use Thunderclap so that all the members together can send a single message in one powerful swoop to all their social media networks. That increases our range considerably. A conservative estimate suggests that via 500 N-VA members, we can reach a good 100,000 people. After the convention we will continue to encourage the members to make regular use of their Twitter and Facebook accounts; the many Commitments are perfect for this, everyone can use them to his or her heart's content. Between February 2 and February 24, we continue at record speed. We mean to promote one of the 25 Commitments each day with every Fleming online who has the right to vote. What we hope to achieve above all is that these people explore their own feelings with respect to the N-VA and the various Commitments. If their reaction is positive, we ask them if they want to like the N-VA Facebook page. We will also politely ask if they will give us their e-mail address. That will enable us to continue to reach them personally during the period of restricted advertising. And it doesn't cost anything! Every vote counts, so the more people we can approach personally, the better. We strongly believe in the value of personal contact with as many people possible. This is a hefty ambition, not simple to achieve, but that is the consequence of the decision to run the campaign on content. It's not for nothing that online communication will be the front line of the campaign. Our opening moves in the campaign war on which we're embarking. If you want to let people see the N-VA differently, you will have to give them arguments that they've never

seen or heard before. The segmentation advantage of working online offers every opportunity to do so. The Google Display network alone already offers us the chance to reach specific groups on landing pages that are relevant to them, with messages, questions or surveys that are relevant to them. We will use Facebook to maintain contact with members and sympathizers and to keep stimulating them to share N-VA content with friends and acquaintances. Google Search is used to get as many people possible to visit the N-VA website in the most cost-efficient way possible, where the fifty Commitment films are ready and waiting. This too is another ideal means of segmentation, this time on the basis of message. We can advertise defensively with search terms that are related to the N-VA, its mandates, local presence, and program items. However, we can also show our offensive side with search terms that refer to other parties, their party standpoints and their well-known figures.

And it just keeps going. Online communication is marvelous, but it demands a great deal of preparation. The do-list is long; you have to know exactly what you want to achieve, as online communication also offers an enormous choice of possibilities. The online marketing plan we have now is a set of guidelines, not a Bible. Nothing is carved in stone, because online communication leads a life of its own – and besides, you have to take unexpected events into account, whether from the opposing camp, political developments, statements, click behavior that turns out differently than you expected – you name it.

This is why the Brandhome and N-VA teams will actually be able to follow every little movement and activity in the online campaign in real time via the online cockpit. We will see the effect of every action we undertake online. All trends, tendencies and results will show up before our eyes immediately, so that we can always adjust our course or throw the whole thing overboard if necessary. What doesn't work, we can analyze, optimize or stop. What works really well in one area, we can use somewhere else as well. I see this dashboard as our secret weapon. It will definitely give us an advantage. It will also help Piet and his team to see which program items score, which messages are received favorably and which not. It will give them an up-to-date picture of how the campaign elements work and, most importantly, whether support for the N-VA is spreading. If so, that's a piece of information that is not only good for extra inspiration and motivation internally, but also for using externally in order to give the general momentum of the campaign more steam, if possible.

As January progresses and the convention rapidly approaches, all the elements begin to take shape. The stage of thinking transitions into the stage of elaboration. Every one of the Commitments is clearly and tightly formulated. The fifty film scripts have been reduced to the essentials and even on paper speak the language the ordinary man or woman on the street. Even the mandate-holders are going along, will have to keep it simple. The cast for the films has been determined, twenty-five real N-VA members and twenty-five N-VA leaders will

each take up one Commitment. An extra little bump has come up: the fifty people will not only be filmed, but also photographed as well – each making the V-sign, for all eventual applications. This has to take place in the same four days that were previously scheduled for the films alone. It's going to be tight, but that's the way it is. I've decided to fly Peter in from Italy. Together with Joris and Sas he will follow up the shooting and edit the texts. He can see fun of it: "We didn't want the films to look super-professional, did we? Well, don't worry: we don't have to go to any trouble, it will all take care of itself." I grasp his meaning when I come take a look at the studio in Brussels. There is indeed very little time per testimonial, and a poorly enunciated text can't be repeated forever. It also doesn't help that the studio is not exactly soundproof. It's raining hard and continuously on the day itself; the noise on the roof right above us even forces the team to stop recording from time to time, it's so bad. And the fact that on one of the days the studio next door has been booked for a fashion shoot with lots of small children does little to help our "quiet on the set." The Dutch crew, however, turn out to be perfect – they never panic; calm is the order of the day. Peter knows how to make people relax in front of the camera in no time, and he chants his mantra to the participants without cease: "What's important is that you mean it and I believe it." Moreover, we laugh a lot. The atmosphere is positive and it shows. While I'm working at my office in Antwerp, Rogier calls. In his naïve Dutch way, he asks me if he can use that guy with the beard – you know, the one that looks

like a gnome – for a Dutch film he's about to shoot. No, that's not such a good idea. That gnome happens to be Jan Peumans, chairman of the Flemish Parliament. It does me good to see that things have come so far that we're no longer dealing with abstractions, that everything's becoming tangible. The Commitments are coming off the page. The people we're filming make them sound good, too. Precisely the fact that it can't be done over ensures an authentic honesty, or that's how I experience it anyway. Several days later, when the films are being edited and titled, it appears that all that preliminary work has not been a waste of time. It's not Hollywood and it's not wow-look-at-us-commercial. These are films that say what has to be said. You only need to see a couple of them to know what the N-VA means by Change for Progress. The people in the films, they mean it. And I believe it.

9.
THE FLEMISH PRESS AND OTHER GNOMES

It doesn't take long after the start of the pre-campaign for the first poisoned arrows to start flying. They strike poor Urbanus – also known as Urbanus van Anus – a Belgian stand-up comedian known for his subversive and at times vulgar humor. On February 3, only a few days after the N-VA party convention, he is called into the studio of Terzake to explain how he ever got it into his head to perform at the N-VA party convention. "Urbanus, but isn't he one of us?" is the general tenor of the reporting in the progressive media, who are quick to pass on pronouncements like these. Urbanus remains unmoved, and the N-VA only looks on with a pitying smile at the whole business. The story is little more than yesterday's leftovers, warmed up, if you look closely. In recent years it's a known fact that Urbanus has been annoyed at the hypocrisy of others – particularly the parties on the left – who have tried to paint the N-VA as "a gang of Nazis." The tax regime of the Di Rupo government also sticks in his craw: "I just did two shows in the Netherlands – one for me, and one for the Government." Bart De Wever had already asked him to use his artistic talents for the party, but nothing had come of it. Now it did, to the satisfaction of both sides. Urbanus wasn't a card-carrying party member, but he did want to make a statement as an artist: "I'm not doing it for my image; I'm doing it because that's the way I am." Let's give credit where credit is due. During Urbanus's performance, I – along with the 4,000 other people present – lay doubled over with laughter.

One thing is clear: the N-VA convention has kick-started the election dynamics. For me, a political convention is something other than what it is for a political party. As an outsider, I have always seen political conventions as feel-good applause machines, good opportunities to reinforce a feeling of belonging within the party, and an excuse to call the press. Sometimes also a bit of crisis management in order to placate supporters and get them behind a position that causes quite an uproar. It seemed to me that this N-VA convention had to be much, much more than that. We always said it from the very start: "The N-VA convention is a chance to establish the party as the political brand that delivers the most content. A brand that isn't all talk and no action. A brand that is about content. A brand that enters the arena thoughtfully and straightforwardly. The convention is the most powerful instrument you can use for this. Because if you want to take over the initiative for the entire campaign, you have to take it there." This is the reason why the fall of 2013 was such a hectic time. Everything had to be ready by the N-VA convention: the positioning, the campaign theme, the online campaign, the website, the films, the online dashboard, the social media approach – everything, everything, everything. And right up to the very last day of the convention, the Brandhome and N-VA teams were busy trying to finish everything up. In the midst of all the action I had followed the entire convention weekend. Thanks to the badges from Piet and Joachim I could enter all the rooms of the convention, where I was able to follow the discussions and attitudes towards the submitted

amendments of all the thousands of members present. I call that *field marketing*: you surrender totally and jump into a brand with both feet in order to experience it to the max, the better to understand it. Attending the convention gave me a feeling of calm. It confirmed the image of the N-VA brand that I had formed in the meantime: "The brand I'm helping to build is a brand that is indeed about content. Not about holding onto or exchanging government posts. Not about how we're pulling the wool over the public's eyes in order to maintain the status quo at all costs." During the convention other members of our team popped in to check out the atmosphere and discuss it further. On Sunday, February 2, at 6:05 p.m., after the closing address by Bart De Wever, all the teams pressed the start button. The pre-campaign had begun.

And there's still no talk of any campaign activity from the other parties. We have succeeded so far in keeping our plan under our hat, and have estimated pretty accurately what the position of the traditional parties would be. According to our analysis at the beginning of the project, it appeared that all of the traditional parties in Belgium would observe "traditional" timing with respect to their campaign activities; that is to say: they all waited as long as possible to start. Not surprising, because over the years they've all been advised by the same "traditional" communication specialists. These classic communication thinkers have flitted from political brand to political brand over the years, and they have all learned the same

trick. In our field we call that a *one-trick pony*. You can compare it to singing the same tune over and over and then asking to be paid for it. The best part is yet to come: those same communication specialists, journalists and other so-called experts walked right into the trap we set for them. I'll get to that in a minute. But one thing is certain: all the other parties were snoozing and we managed to take them by surprise. The head start that the N-VA managed to book with its own party convention is huge. Sunday, February 2, 2014, the N-VA films go online and the pre-campaign starts in the social media. In the days that follow the number of views on the website goes through the roof and we note an increase of thousands of likes on the N-VA Facebook page. Like Urbanus, our films don't have to wait long for the slings and arrows of outrage. Noteworthy is the fact that the public is tweeting more about the content than the form. Apparently, for the man or woman on the street it's more about what is said than how. From professional marketing and advertising quarters, however, comes the hiss of denigrating commentary: amateurish, ugly, wooden, bad Dutch, not credible. I laugh when I read that one of these so-called experts is convinced that these are actors who are deliberately speaking in an amateurish way. It seems once again that perception is reality. It's strange, moreover, that advertising professionals – who spend months frittering away costly hours while thinking about content – are the ones letting themselves get worked up about form. Does it once again have to do with the fact that it's about the N-VA? As if, on request – though the

advertising folks don't call up the journalists themselves – something else negative can be written about the N-VA? It still seems far-fetched to me. But it says a lot about the level of insight and perspicacity in the Belgian advertising and communication world. They just walk right into twenty-millimeter range. I can scarcely contain my excitement when I see all those critics go after us. Without realizing it, they are building the campaign for us. And I'm even more tickled when I think of how all those brands that rely on those so-called communication specialists today, will tomorrow fall flat on their faces. And I don't just mean the political brands – I mean all brands that are served by these downright incompetent professionals. As the CEO of a company, don't even think of entrusting your business to advertising people with big egos – egos so big they drive right over a cliff, taking your brand – and bottom line – along with them.

Timing is everything. Not only for surprising your opponents in their sleep, but especially for the message with which you wake them. We discussed this extensively with the N-VA team. We also talked about what films with what N-VA members would be added to the online campaign mix at what moment. Jef and Joachim were the ones who came up with the idea of using the film with N-VA member Kris Matheussen, Commitment 08: "I want to feel safe – with a strong police force and effective punishments," as the first to go online on Sunday, February 2, immediately after the convention. According to Jef and Joachim, we would immediately reach our

goal of having our opponents build the campaign right from the start. A brilliant move, it already seemed the day after, Monday, February 3. Even before the online pre-campaign was up to speed, the film was already the conversation piece of the day. From talk shows to radio broadcasts and newspaper websites. Everything was about Kris, about the N-VA, about the far-reaching amateurism of the people who made this, and so on. Within 24 hours all manner of parodies turned up about Commitment 08: "I want to feel safe." Parodies of Kris, who was unhappy about her period and wanted a new maxi pad, Kris mixed in with various dance numbers. And the parodies were immediately parodied. Only 72 hours later, we counted more than 60 parodies. "Fantastic," as Eddy Wally would say! We hardly spent a Euro, and our opponents are already busy building our campaign. Behind the scenes, though, it's another story. Kris is hard hit that she's being ridiculed by almost everyone. For a few days, stay-at-home mom Kris is suddenly a VIP, or rather, a VIP under fire. Joachim Pohlmann and Fons Duchateau clear their agendas and come to her aid. For a few days they make it their task to advise Kris and coach her in how to handle the situation. After all, no one had expected that the press would take the bait and bite back so venomously. I follow from a distance via e-mail, and of course via the media. It thrills me to see how they support each other. It's a little like the motto of the American army, what's known as the Warrior Ethos. It rests on four pillars, the best known of which is "I will never leave a fallen comrade" – no man is left behind.

As an aside, a special mention – out of admiration – for the satirical website De Rechtzetting ("Putting Things Right"). In a brilliantly written piece they reported that the director Jan Verheyen, world famous in Flanders, admitted to being the man behind the N-VA films. Brilliant article, right down to the details, including the quotes: "Film critic Danny Van Kessel was one of the first to recognize the hand of Verheyen in the style of the N-VA films. "The uneasy mix of proper Dutch and regional dialect was already a clear signal." I hadn't heard of the website then, but since this article I've become a regular visitor. It really lifts your spirits. As it turns out they weren't so far from the truth, because in one of the preparatory meetings, on October 30, 2013, at 6:30 p.m., to be exact, Piet came up with the idea of asking Jan Verheyen while we were brainstorming in the Felix Pakhuis in Antwerp.

The week after the convention, media pressure against the N-VA is building. Now I'm starting to understand a lot better why the N-VA politicians were tenser in the period around the party convention. It was especially noticeable during the days when we were shooting. You saw from the clothes they had chosen for their camera appearance that they had spent a little more time thinking about it than usual, or so it looked. You noticed it in the last little changes they wanted to make to the texts. It was funny in the case of Siegfried Bracke, who had the text he had e-mailed earlier with him, with "a few changes." These turned out to be a whole new text,

handwritten between the crossed-out lines of the original script. Peter, responsible for the deleted text, doesn't seem to mind one way or the other. You can't have lived in Belgium for ten years without knowing Siegfried Bracke from TV, and he probably expected as much from the critical ex-journalist. He reacted stoically to the mass-slaughter of his script: "If you can say it better than I can write it, that's fine with me." And Siegfried could say it very well indeed. We didn't catch any of the participating politicians working with us as a quick aside or routine task. They took it seriously, in the understanding that this would become the N-VA campaign. Starting with the convention, the cat would be out of the bag and politicians know: from then on there's no way back. The fight has begun in earnest. From that moment on every word will have to be weighed with especial care. The spotlights of the media will be switched on and they will only be turned off when the last vote has been cast. And if you know that you're part of the N-VA and that so many powers in the media are standing with daggers drawn, ready to slice your every utterance to ribbons – well, that realization would also make me a bit more tense than usual.

For us as team Brandhome, there were also moments of greater tension in the days leading up to the party convention – more than usual before a campaign of our own design. We've already helped bring so many things on the market, but never a political party. The N-VA is moreover ahead of the game. Just imagine that

our campaign strikes a false note, is explained differently than we intended. Imagine that this campaign of all campaigns damages the party's position in the polls instead of pushing it ahead. It's always possible to make adjustments, but never to such an extent that what comes across as totally wrong can be given a new twist. It would be disastrous for the N-VA if their election results dropped below 30% because of our campaign… such thoughts creep up on us, but luckily there's too much to do for us to dwell on them at length.

The gnomes, for example. What are we going to do with those? At Brandhome we've been passing out jolly orange "Fuck-you" gnomes by the German artist Ottmar Hörl for years. We have almost certainly left behind at least a thousand at various events and meetings. They even travel abroad with us, and we give them away there too. The orange Fuck-you gnome also has a brother, the Victory gnome. Direct hit. A modern garden gnome making a V-sign, a campaign in which the V-sign is central, a political party for which humor is not a dirty word and a party leader who is capable of linking all this verbally. In America it's called a no-brainer. The upshot was that I bought all the yellow peace gnomes I could find for Brandhome, plus a few black and red ones for good measure. At the time, only days before the convention, I didn't really have a specific idea of how to use them. In the first place, they would be perfect gadgets for the N-VA party office – perhaps as a gift you could win via social media, perhaps something to use in a film, we would just

have to see. Piet has already been a fan of Ottmar's gnomes for some time. He has "hear no evil, see no evil, speak no evil" in his office, three gnomes in the Belgian tricolor: black, yellow, red. "There's little chance I'll forget what country we're in," he smiles. I drop off a few yellow V-gnomes at Piet's office. It's there that Ben Weyts and Bart De Wever see the gnomes and get the idea to pass out yellow V-gnomes to N-VA newcomers at the party convention. Which the huge crowd at the Antwerp Expo center receives with raving enthusiasm; it turns into an emotional moment when Bart De Wever suddenly addresses an N-VA militant personally in the concluding address. A party pioneer who is turning 75, but who didn't want her family to organize a birthday party because "that's the day of the party convention." Bart turns the N-VA convention into a birthday party for Marcella Droogmans and while 4,000 people sing "Happy Birthday," he hands her a yellow N-VA gnome as a present. It wasn't the idea; it wasn't even thought out beforehand, but this will turn out to be the official birth of the yellow N-VA gnome. From that moment on, the N-VA's yellow V-gnome will begin to lead a life of its own; we don't have to lift a finger. That's because the gnomes in the press will do the rest.

Three days after the convention, the headlines of *De Standaard* evening edition ran: "N-VA abuses our gnome." It is presented like a quote from the mouth of Ottmar Hörl himself, but it isn't. It appears that journalists from *De Standaard* called Cornelia, the artist's wife,

at home. They told her the story of how the yellow gnomes were now being taken up by a Flemish-nationalist party. The sentence is telling: "Cornelia hasn't been able to speak to her husband in the meantime, but she stresses that he wouldn't agree with this political recuperation of his statuette." "Nationalism" sounds very different to German ears than it does to the rest of the world because of the country's past. And the insinuating journalists from *De Standaard* made clever use of this fact to drum up a few random quotes. It didn't come as a surprise to me. I had already had a frightened Cornelia on the phone that day, and I had also spoken to her a few more times in the days that followed. I already knew her fairly well by then, because I had become her biggest customer for orange Fuck-you gnomes. The article by the paparazzi from *De Standaard* prompted many Belgian clients to start cancelling their orders for Ottmar's gnomes. A gnome-sized riot had at any rate broken out. And that fit into our strategy perfectly – a strategy that was given extra fuel by Bruno Tobback, chairman of the sp.a (Flemish socialists), who was dumb enough to put a red Fuck-you gnome on his desk. His tweet goes out into the world via the sp.a account, but comes back like a boomerang in the form of unflattering reactions and peaking interest in the original, the yellow N-VA gnome. At Brandhome we're rolling on the floor with laughter, again. The gnome that Tobback bought is an illegal copy of the real gnome used by the N-VA. The Tobback gnome is a gnome that was made in China by the hands of children. Too bad the paparazzi at *De Standaard* didn't bother to investigate…

or maybe they did, but as good leftist journalists decided not to do anything with it.

Go take lessons from a good communications advisor, I would say. Never try to take over the image or message of someone else in order to make a point; in this way you always contribute to their campaign. At any rate, it is astonishing to see serious journalists making such an effort to try to associate the N-VA with a Nazi-gnome that also forms part of Ottmar Hörl's collection. It is a garden gnome doing a Nazi salute. But here the artist is making a satirical comment on the rise of fascism in Germany – a context that is nowhere mentioned in the Flemish press in stories about the gnomes. It is suggested, and left at that. Every scratch on the face of the N-VA counts for something seems to be the attitude. A feeling of disbelief steals over me at the lack of professional seriousness and honor: what occupies these people? Not their profession as objective journalists, that's clear. I think it's even a step lower than gutter journalism. And that from a supposedly respectable newspaper like *De Standaard*. If I were the editor-in-chief, I would be dying of shame. With a paper like *Bild Zeitung*, at least they're honest about the fact that their news comes from the bottom of the garbage heap, and if they can't find anything lurid enough they'll make it up. I'm not saying this because we as an agency are working for the N-VA, but the further we get in this project, the more I begin to notice just how cowardly many people are with respect to the N-VA. I mean: go work for the sp.a or the

PVDA+ (Partij van de Arbeid; even further to the left than sp.a); then you can try to damage the N-VA from all sides and to your heart's content. But don't do it as a journalist. Barricading yourself in the well-appointed offices of *De Standaard* and from this vantage point skulking around looking for shit to throw – man, man, man, that's pathetic.

After the N-VA convention the gates are opened in the media. The venomous commentary on the N-VA gets as much free play as the bulls in the streets of Pamplona. "Bart De Wever fears that his church will empty if he reveals his true intentions," pontificates *De Morgen* above one article. On Vandaag.be ("Today.be") they don't beat around the bush: "War against N-VA has begun," they rightly observe while plucking a few choice quotes from other media. Such as the outburst of Charles Michel of the MR (French-speaking liberals) against the N-VA in *De Zevende Dag* (a popular political talk show on Sunday): "I hate nationalism. Nationalism to me is the same as egoism." Another good one: "You don't give matches to a pyromaniac," says Vincent de Wolf, who stands at the top of the MR election lists in Brussels. Still, it is *De Standaard* that seems to have taken upon itself the task of giving the N-VA a really hard time. First, for all certainty, the N-VA's ambition to take part in a government coalition is given a sharp edge: "The biggest threat to the N-VA as their score starts to climb above 30 percent is hubris. The new self-confidence in combination with that eternal underdog business

can easily derail their meticulously adjusted tone." A barely veiled specimen of wishful thinking.

Also striking, but different, was the lack of attention paid to the N-VA convention by the VRT. The biggest national broadcaster was only interested enough in the poll leader's convention to attend on the last day – in contrast to the other broadcasters, VTM, RTBF and RTL. Public broadcasting, independent as usual, could not be expected to cover the event (for reasons mentioned earlier). You could just shrug your shoulders at the whole thing, but it makes you think. In the Antwerp Expo halls there was room for 4,000 N-VA members and sympathizers; the rest – at any rate more than 50,000 other N-VA members and hundreds of thousands of sympathizers – had to be satisfied with coverage that was limited at best and at worst biased. These are instructive times, the days during and after the conventions. In spite of what Piet De Zaeger and others inside the N-VA had predicted about what would happen in the media in the run up to the elections, I can honestly say that I hadn't expected that even the VRT – which, don't forget, we all subsidize with our taxes – would let itself be seduced into presenting a distorted image of events. Or that a widely read and generally respected newspaper like *De Standaard* would go to work so viciously. "Oh, this is nothing," they chirp happily at the N-VA. "Just wait until we go up again in the polls – then wait till you see what happens." To judge by today's reporting, I can scarcely begin to imagine.

The good news in the meantime is that our social media campaign is right on track. It hit like a bomb and we look on with astonishment at the developments unfolding on our online dashboard. We have shot through all the objectives we set for ourselves in terms of getting our message across to the real rulers of this country: its citizens. All the subjective journalists, all the classic communication thinkers, all the politicians in a waking dream, all of them – without knowing it – are advertising for our campaign, for the N-VA. They are giving us the attention we need to get the gears in motion. On our dashboard we can practically see live what's happening online with our films and we follow all the reactions on Twitter and Facebook. The numbers all tell the same story: as often as the Commitments of the N-VA are now being viewed, they would never be seen on classic TV. Not all films are watched in equal measure, and some of them not at all, but others are looked at quite a lot and some have even gone viral. A lot is tweeted and retweeted about them and the commentary doesn't come out of the blue, either for or against, positive or peevish. Something is getting started here, as we had hoped: an N-VA campaign is already coming to life while the other parties still have to get started. Thanks to the gnomes, the meaning of the V-sign suddenly seems to be picked up more easily as the embodiment of the V's that stand for Change (*Verandering*) and Progress (*Vooruitgang*). Although somebody somewhere has made a joke about it in a cartoon, the V-sign seems to be accepted in general. So far, there's no talk of damaging side effects, as far as

we can see. There will always be people who laugh at you – which in itself is not so bad, and you shouldn't be afraid of it. What we wanted happened, and that's the whole point. At this early stage in the game, the message with the V's is already coming across loud and clear.

What is also coming across loud and clear is that Brandhome is the agency involved in the N-VA campaign. I had already taken the initiative of sending out a brief press release in the specialized press: "Brandhome works on films for the N-VA." Like a stone dropped in the water, so you know how deep it is, and how long it will take ripples to reach the banks. That stone made not one ripple in the pond. As an agency we don't exactly belong to the old boys network of the Belgian advertising world, so the newsworthiness of the release was not exactly huge. Nevertheless, thanks to our gnomes we suddenly show up clearly on the radar of the media with that of a wider public as well. We get requests from TV stations to come have a look around our offices and talk about the N-VA campaign and the gnomes. They want to come film at our offices. We get requests from journalists for interviews. But we never talk about clients, and we're not going to start now. Our ego doesn't get in the way. For every question about the N-VA that comes in, the journalists who call and come calling receive our standard answer: Brandhome does not share information about its clients. While the campaign is being made mincemeat of in various VRT programs, Luc Rademaekers, general director of the VRT, sends me an SMS asking if I don't want

to come give some explanation of the N-VA campaign in the VRT studios. When he calls me later I really want to pick up, because Luc is a clever, sympathetic guy. I know him from his time as editor-in-chief of the *Gazet van Antwerpen*. I always call him "the last of the Flemish socialists." That always bugs him. In the past I've had a lot of contact with him and he has never betrayed my trust in any way. But I can't afford to talk to him now. I can't trust anyone for the time being.

Suddenly I start getting phone calls with the question: "Gosh, Erik, what's this I read – are you working for the N-VA now?" An innocent enough question, but the tone used to ask it doesn't exactly resound with enthusiastic interest. It's something else. I know that tone. It is politely packaged disapproval I hear. It's started, I think. I'm about to be seen as an N-VA member. Ok, fine. Something new for my career. I was warned, so no complaining. Moreover, as long as it doesn't go any further than grumbling commentary left and right, I can live with it. It isn't as if either I, or my agency, was planning a terroristic attack or something. People aren't so stupid that they'll think that, or get angry about it, are they?

I can't imagine.

10.
A FINGER IN THE MAIL

"May the hand of God protect you."

During the days of March 2014 that I'm in Dubai to speak at Dubai Lynx, the largest advertising festival in the Middle East, Africa and Asia, I meet a good contact of mine. In the meantime he has become one of the most influential leaders in the region. I've been traveling around this part of the world for years, and it takes a lot of time to make contacts and build up relations. The language, the culture, the outlook on life, the distance… all bridges that need crossing. But once you're on the other side, if you stay yourself, have respect for other cultures, and – most of all – if you're honest, these relations put down deep roots and you make friends for life. Deep and unconditional friendships. Friendships that we in our part of the Western world have forgotten how to make, thanks to short-term opportunism, lies and deceit. During our conversation I tell him about the implicit and in the meantime explicit threats I've been getting. He listens attentively and nods, and continues to look at me for a while after I've finished. After which he added the words: "*May the hand of God protect you.*" Which amounts to saying, "I will pray that the hand of God will watch over you." He did not smile when saying it; his wish was not an ironic comment, that much was clear.

"Be careful and be prepared for everything, Erik," he said. "Politics is the same everywhere, it makes no difference. There will always be people who have something to lose if something changes politically in a country. And often those are people who have very long arms

and can exercise their influence in the business world, the media, anywhere. If they get you in their sights, well, you never know, my friend." His words of warning really hit me, right then. I took them seriously because he is someone you take seriously. You can laugh hard together, but if he is serious, he is completely serious. "May the hand of God protect you" – as he said it, I didn't need to be religious to understand the message and take it to heart. In one way or another, it touched me even more deeply than the previous warnings of Piet and others on the N-VA campaign team. What they had told me about their own experiences since they started on the N-VA adventure was truly disconcerting, but at the time I still looked at it as an unsuspecting marketing man. I heard what they were saying, I took them seriously, but somehow that's just how we're made – we all too easily file that sort of knowledge away in the drawer marked "Good to know for later." Fair is fair, and in the maelstrom of daily life after the encounter with my Arabic friend, even his words got pushed to the back of my head. The madness of the day takes over your thoughts and if nothing you were warned about actually happens, you keep going as if – well, as if nothing had happened.

Let's turn back the clock for a moment. It's several weeks after the N-VA convention. In the meantime, word has gotten around in the sector and in the press that Brandhome is behind the N-VA campaign. After the initial and still fairly innocent-sounding reactions ("Oh, what's this I read, are you working for the N-VA?"),

I begin to receive signals that let me know how people feel about Brandhome and me in less thinly disguised terms. They contain a degree of threatening language that, as the weeks go by, starts to take on increasingly malignant forms. It's not long before my surprise begins to make way for strange mix of fear, dismay and anger. Like Urbanus, who had to go explain himself in *Terzake*, I am "summoned" in the days after the N-VA convention to come explain in a number of places – physically, via the telephone or in a roundabout way. I will not name any names of people or firms who pressured me during this period, whether directly or indirectly, to stop working for the N-VA. Nor did I excuse myself to anyone, although there were people in particular positions who thought that I should. These people constructed an odd mix of almost morbid convolutions and circular arguments. I was most astonished when I had to appear before a client (now an all but ex-client, because we've been given a "budget haircut," as they say – or, as one would say it in normal Dutch, we've been kicked out) who read me the riot act about how they could allow themselves to work with or be identified with an agency that works for an extreme right-wing party. Let those who may understand. A strange line of reasoning, especially if you turn it around. A company whose major market share and certainly the better part of whose profits – at least in Belgium – come from the Flemish market, where the N-VA received more than 30% of the votes in the polls, and thus where the majority of its clients vote for the N-VA. Of course that company is going to voice an opinion

about it and put an agency under pressure. This amounts to the same thing as the brand treating its Flemish clients with contempt: their money's good enough to take, but the brand arrogates to itself the right to form an opinion for them – and on top of that to treat them like imbeciles. This may be a strange way of reasoning, but it's no stranger than what I got thrown at me.

By around noon on Wednesday, February 5, I've already had so many phone calls and I can see the growing unease among Brandhome employees who didn't work on the N-VA project, but who feel pressure from clients and contacts, and start to be ashamed that we ever worked for the N-VA. At the time, I've already received several of the "convocations" mentioned above. That day we have a work meeting at 3:30 p.m. with the N-VA team in Brussels. After the meeting I ask Piet if he can spare ten minutes. I tell Piet what's been going on. Piet is not surprised. He looks at me and sees that I am radiating a mix of anger and negativity. Piet says: "Erik, you were warned. This was to be expected. But stay on the ball. Don't fall into the traps they set for you. You will have to undergo humiliations. Control your fear and your anger. Do it for yourself, but especially to protect your own people and the project." Wise words. We part company and agree not to talk to anyone about it. That will distract us from our project and our focus: winning the elections on May 25. Just hold your breath and jump in.

On the drive home that evening in my car, my thoughts wander back to the stories my grandpa Isere and my grandma Joanna used to tell me. They raised me as a child and I lived with them, together with my brother. My grandmother often told me stories of how my grandfather and his brother-in-law were in the Resistance against the German occupation. And how they smuggled food, weapons, cigarettes and Jewish refugees through the woods. The stories often ended up with my grandfather staying away from home for days at a time, without my grandmother knowing where he was, if he had been caught or even if he was still alive. The explanation my grandfather always gave was the following "If you're underway in the woods and you have to leave the trail because you unexpectedly run into a German checkpoint, then you end up getting lost in the woods, but then you have to keep running, and keep searching for a way out, because if you stay where you were, they'll find you for sure." And all those years my grandfather always ended up coming home." It was only in the winter of '44 that the Gestapo stormed in at three in the morning and took him away to a prison camp in Germany. And from that prison camp he also escaped, and rode home on a bicycle without tires. I remember these stories, because right up to the day my grandmother died at the age of 94, she was always awakened at three in the morning by the memory. So deeply embedded in her mind was the fear she must have experienced. In the period when I went out a lot and worked late in nightclubs, I usually got home around that time and we would drink a cup

of tea together while she told me that story again. I would like to ask her for advice now, but she's no longer with us. One thing is certain: I'm all alone in this, and just like my grandfather I will have to find a way out of these dark woods alone. I will undergo this totally alone. But it will make me stronger. I know a lot of people who have been through wars as children, and that does something to you. It somehow makes a man of you, and teaches you how to put things in perspective. This will be my war. I'm not going to let them get me. This is hands down the darkest period of my business life. What I see now is a rotten country, held together by invisible and subliminal corruption. It is indeed time for Change. It is time for the ranks, which have remained closed for so long, to open up and reveal their darkest secrets. And I am seeing this rot now for the first time in my life. When my chauffeur drops me off at home that night, he asks what's going on. He can see and feel that something's wrong with me. If you spend so many hours together in the car over the years, you're bound to form a bond. That evening I tell him I'm being threatened, and that we have to be extra careful. My wife and children are already sleeping. I go into my office and work until deep in the night. Later that night, I cry. It's been a long time since I've shed a tear. I cry for this country. I cry for the scandalous way people are treated. I cry for the corruption in this country. I cry for the lies foisted on its trusting inhabitants. I cry for the need this country has for change. But I have hope. Hope in change. Finally I go to sleep, because – as always – sleep is a good advisor.

Who are these companies, these brands and people? The temptation to name names is immense. Those who know me a little know that I'm pretty good at distinguishing emotion from reason. I'm the kind of person who likes to rationalize whatever comes at me, to create order, to try and understand the background of what people are telling me. Looking back on this period today – and on the weeks that followed – this personality trait really helped me not to go to the press in a blind rage. What would that have accomplished? During the campaign period it would have been grabbed, distorted and mangled, which would only lead to loss of focus among the teams working on the campaign. And for the employees of the companies and institutions in question: would they benefit from it? I don't think so. Imagine that tomorrow all their customers who vote for the N-VA – and all their other customers as well – were disgusted by the behavior of the management and took their business elsewhere. That would only cause big problems for the companies at the expense of the employees. The management in question would, in the "classic presidential style," run off with a big fat pile of cash from their severance package. No, I'm not going to name any names.

The denigrating experiences and threats continue as before. I learn to live with it and see things in perspective. *Business as usual*. I just build an imaginary wall around the threats I receive. But I have to listen carefully. The underlying messages are sometimes so subtly expressed that I almost don't get it. One client called me specifically

in regards to our collaboration with the N-VA and asked me: "Aren't you afraid you're going to lose business because of this?" A question that seems to express professional interest, but actually means: "Do you think we are going to keep working with you?" The bad thing is, is that I can pretty well understand where such an attitude suddenly comes from. We're all only human after all; I can understand if someone has personal antipathy, even revulsion, towards a particular political party. I can even imagine feeling that way myself. But I am absolutely certain that I would never let that feeling spill over onto someone who was only doing business with such a party. Someone who is only doing their job to the best of their ability, as they would for any other client. How does that harm your other clients? If that were indeed the case, I could probably understand it – not approve of it, but understand it. But our work for the N-VA did not for a minute interfere with our work for other clients. Professionally speaking, there was not one single reason why I deserved to be called on the carpet. Business is business; business can be rough – but hey, no problem! But this commentary was entirely personal – and by phone, not face-to-face, not man-to-man. Cowardly behavior. This, however, was evidently just the beginning, because it quickly went from bad to worse. More people from our professional environment and my network crawled out of the woodwork to deplore my unfortunate decision to work for the N-VA. Just a sample of the hackneyed tunes that were played for me over and over again gives an idea of just how many fine shades of ugly there are:

"What self-respecting agency would work with a brand like the N-VA?"

"I don't like this coming from your firm, Erik,
I didn't know you were for the N-VA."

"I think this is going to cost you a lot of business, no doubt about it."

Because we always have conversations with interested prospects or start up a preliminary trajectory to see if we can eventually work together, we also got reactions from this quarter – and how. If our clients still managed to speak in euphemistic terms, the prospects didn't bother holding back at all:

"I'll never work with a party like you, what did you think?"

"Wow. Gee. So you're the ones who work for the N-VA!
Our conversation stops here!"

Those were just the simple announcements and other glimpses of disapproval. It got worse when what was being said to me began to shade into actual threats. At first they were still of a professional nature:

"If you don't stop, I will call everyone I know to run your business
into the ground!"

But the Darkest Day of All came when the threats turned personal:

"You'd better be careful that something doesn't happen to you personally; you've read Sun Tzu, haven't you? …or worse, that something doesn't happen to your wife and children; you're away from home a lot, aren't you?"

It's been years since I've hit someone, but I punched this person, a respectable "manager." Attacking someone in the boxing ring is very different than unexpectedly hitting someone. Someone who's not expecting it. Someone who arouses your anger. Touch my children, and I'm coming after you. It's that simple. I still haven't been summoned by the police to give an explanation, and I don't think that's ever going to happen. But it marks you forever. I'm not proud of attacking someone like that. Those days I was also thinking a lot of how someone like Bart De Wever should respond in a situation like that. As mayor of Antwerp, he's launched a war on drugs, on terrorists returning from abroad, on crime. He also has children. Does this happen to him too? How does he handle it? I want to ask him. I want to ask Piet. But I have to overcome and undergo this myself. This isn't about me. What's happening to me is collateral damage. This is about a campaign, a project, in which I am now involved not only professionally but also personally. A real war between the Warriors for Change and the Warriors for Status Quo. Now it's clear to me what Piet meant by the Mother of All Elections.

Sun Tzu. Yes, I have also read it. Several times. In different translations. Marketing is war, after all. War for a particular market that someone else has and that you want, or that someone else wants to take away from you, and you want to defend. General Sun also says: "Appear strong when you're weak, and weak when you're strong." The Dutch taught me to pave dead-end streets with mines. Now the time has come. When I receive a number of indirect – but also direct – signals that we might run into trouble with the tax authorities, I ask our accountants on Sunday, March 2, to arrange for an interim report from our auditors. They look surprised when we ask them to do an interim audit. "Are you going to sell your business?" they ask. What am I supposed to say now? Do I have to lie to our auditors? No, I'm not going to do that. I tell them the truth. Now they look even more surprised. On March 26 we receive confirmation that all our books are, as always, in perfect shape. Voilà, we're ready in case we start getting harassed by the tax authorities. This way we can keep going. In the meantime you get used to all the hullaballoo. And it increases as 25 May rushes toward us on winged feet.

When I go through my mail on the evening of Monday, April 28, after coming back from ten days in Los Angeles, I find a letter containing a hacked-off gnome finger. It is the orange shit finger of the Fuck-you gnomes that Brandhome gives away. And it's arrived at my home address. So it probably comes from somebody who once received one from me. Humor has to stop somewhere. How sick can

you be? I didn't show this piece of mail to my wife; I never told her about any of this nonsense. My business. Literally and figuratively. Something like this makes you feel powerless. You can't refuse mail, it slips into the mailbox unannounced and as long as the CIA isn't screening your mail for death threats, strange powder or hacked-off gnome fingers, you have to open it yourself. After thinking about it I decided against going to the police. I saw myself showing up at the station – what am I going to say: "Good morning, someone just sent me a hacked off gnome finger anonymously in the mail…"? The chance that the perpetrator will be found: fairly small. I notice that I'm starting to abandon the notion that everything will be ok. I remember the advice of my mentors: "*Erik, make sure a new job is never further than three calls away.*" I lose my way for a moment. I notice I'm getting weaker. But then I think of Sun Tzu. That same weekend I send a "distress signal" to my international network. I let people know using the right channels, and in a culturally appropriate way, that I'm looking for a new challenge. Preferably a challenge outside Belgium. A challenge far away from this mess. It doesn't take 48 hours for the first offers to come in. My profile is so atypical that it's unique. My Dutch mentors once described my profile as "someone who can make something from nothing, and can make of something a lot more." Reactions to my distress call also come in. Many of my contacts do not seep surprised at what is happening to me, beginning with a number of Belgians who have been away for a long time. Their advice is: no one in the world is sitting around

waiting for Belgium. And that just about says it all. I'm not going to make any hasty decisions. First I've got a campaign to win; I can think it over at leisure this summer.

All of this takes place in the background of work, which in the meantime goes on as usual. I try to shake off the reactions and threats as best I can. If clients don't want to work with us anymore, so be it. Officially we haven't received any cancellations, although I see that a number of projects have been "suspended." As far as prospects are concerned – that is, potential new business – the consequences are negative. Around half of the running contracts have been ended, the rest are on hold (by the time election day comes around, the total damage amounts to around 1.5 million euros in cancelled projects and missed chances). And as an entrepreneur you weren't born yesterday. You know that this is just the beginning. If your current market reacts with such fury, you know that your market will dry up in the end, and that you'll have to come up with something else. But in the meantime we just go on about our business with the N-VA.

The campaign and in particular the social media campaign are doing great, the 25 Commitments for Progress are right on target, the V-sign has burned itself into the collective retina of the market, the pins with the now well-known V are worn with pride by all party members and politicians. Moreover, the press and all our opponents and their supporters are making publicity for the story

Change for Progress. Who are those people advertising anyway, you ask yourself. N-VA directs and dominates, against all expectations and with opposition on every level – the so-called *go to markets* of the elections. Every evening I'm up until 1:30 a.m. analyzing our online dashboard on my laptop, reading everybody's blogs, all the articles. At the baker, the butcher, the checkout counter at the gas station and supermarket, on the train, in my boxing club, everywhere. Everywhere I go I talk to people about the elections. What they're concerned about. What they expect. What they fear. Pure marketing. Among people. I hear it, I feel it, I read it: Flanders wants change. Flanders is tired of being treated as if its people were stupid, tired of being lied to. Bart De Wever's prediction is coming true: Flemings are silent avengers.

My greatest fear is that the so-called communication advisors of our opponents will also read what I'm reading. I have a bad moment when sp.a figurehead Bruno Tobback rightly takes the VRT's *Auditeurs* ("the Auditors," a television program) to task in the studio of the talk show *Terzake*. Are they even worthy of the name "Auditors"? Well, let's just call it a number of self-declared marketing and communication gurus who are fumbling along beside the point, and, how could it be otherwise: trying to bring down the N-VA campaign. Luckily. Tobback's distress call ebbs away and the opponents persist in giving fuel to our campaign. With every action they undertake to undermine the credibility of the N-VA

campaign, they weaken themselves. Their only sounding board is the press, which they follow blindly in terms of the images they form. They have no idea, no clear picture of what is taking shape among the real rulers of this country, the voters. For the sake of correctness, I think I should mention that there are two political brands that acquit themselves better, and are not so full of themselves: Groen (Green) and the PVDA (Partij van de Arbeid). Not exactly brands whose way of thinking I support, but I do have respect for their approach and their clarity. If there are two brands that can be considered worthy opponents, then strangely enough they are these two. However, they can't find any weaknesses in the N-VA's defensive line either.

While the war wages on, Flemish opinion tips further in favor of the N-VA. It seems like the right moment to connect several important Commitments to what they could potentially mean for the future of the people for whom they are intended. Content is once again central, but now worked out in a feel-good version. And of course preferably in a way that will get people talking, and eventually go viral or inspire those who oppose the N-VA to start plagiarizing again – the latter is now just another factor that we take into consideration: if the other side likes to shoot itself in the foot, who are we to hold them back? We want to inject more emotion into our story. Because we see from our dashboards and analyses that many undecided voters are prepared to vote for the N-VA, but they still don't have that emotional layer on top of the content. You can

discuss it as long as you want, but essentially it's something intangible like emotion that makes people unrealistic. In fact this is the essence of our craft: brand building. But how are we going to do it? And where? The answer isn't long in coming. On April 7, Bart De Wever and Nadia Sminate are guests on *Reyers Politiek* (another political talk show). Each political party is asked to show a one-minute film that encapsulates their vision. Hey! That's our commercial! You know – that commercial that no broadcaster was willing to sell us. One minute of prime time. Alas, one minute of prime time, but on the first Monday of Easter vacation, and moreover late in the evening. But ok, it's better than nothing. And it's free! In the meantime we know that we can't count on the cooperation of anyone in the Flemish production landscape. In our Skype calls with the N-VA team – by now standard procedure – usually late at night, on the weekend, or early in the morning, we take the briefing in hand. We ping pong back and forth amongst ourselves. "Admit it, progress, the future, that is something for the coming years, so it's something good to know for young families, upcoming families, isn't it?" Joachim throws out. He's a special guy, that Joachim. He doesn't say much, but when he does say something he's spot on. More or less watertight. Peter's first, spontaneous reaction is that it would be nice to do something with a newborn baby. He goes to work, we go to work, and a day later we draw up our nets. The catch is many sided; there are some splendid ideas there. But with production problems, production schedule and production budget in hand, some scripts

just aren't possible anymore. Unanimous preference goes to the concept of "baby Lucas" because the story written for it is just as relevant for its content as for its emotional beauty. You see from the reactions of Nele and Sas, the women on the N-VA and Brandhome teams, that it works. Piet, Joachim, Jef, Joris, Peter and I ask the opinions of our respective spouses. Free market research – you get the idea. And these ladies likewise eat it up. We've got it. We're going to do this.

Easy? Alas. Time for the umpteenth annoyance, because once again we get a *no* everywhere we go to make a film for the N-VA. We decided then that Rogier and his Amsterdam crew were going to produce it again; Peter jumps in for the shooting again and our team here takes care of the rest, such as finding a newborn baby. Easier said than done. There are not so many brand new parents that are eager to help the N-VA, nor is Belgium full of babies that are a few days old and available on a date that can't be shifted. But where there's a will, there's a way. We succeed in getting three Flemish newborns to a studio in Antwerp; one of them does everything right at just the right moment. It also takes a bit of luck. In that respect we are also helped by the fact that Klara voice Manuela Van Werde is a member of the N-VA. She can do the voice over and that's a good thing, too, because no other actor or actress in Flanders is willing to risk getting burned. At any rate: there's Lucas. A clean delivery, in the end; as far as we are concerned, it's a beautiful baby. He's right on time, too: on

April 7 Lucas goes online and then we'll see how the world reacts. It isn't going to be a big explosion, because who watches *Reyers Politiek* on the first Monday of Easter vacation at 10 p.m.? Luckily we have Bieke Verlinden, an sp.a politician from Leuven, who helps us get extra attention. I'll get to that later.

The atmosphere in the teams is good. Everyone's working at full steam and laughs a lot while they're at it. The prize for "best campaign idea," however, goes to Bart De Wever. When I leave Dubai on Saturday night, March 15, to go to the airfield in Abu Dhabi, where I'll catch a flight home, I read on the website HLN.be that "Panda De Wever" fell off the stage. My heart skips a beat. What's this? What happened? Even from Dubai I can usually follow up everything with Piet and the teams via Skype. I can't stop laughing when I read that, at the gala where the award for the most popular television show in Flanders was to be presented, Bart came dressed as a panda and fell off the stage – a tumble of nearly a meter. As for the panda costume, well, that's a rather long and involved story about "zoo politics" in Flanders and Wallonia (just Google "Panda De Wever"). The production house had asked him to present, and leave it to Bart to do so in the spirit of the evening. At any rate it was memorable and Bart is also one of the few politicians who can get away with something like this. I found surprisingly many reactions on various forums about his sense of humor, and how it's high time for politicians to be able to laugh at themselves a bit more.

It is a side that only Bart himself can show, as a person, and that is a boon, especially for the party. As a party you can't afford to do crazy things; after all, people expect you to take their problems seriously and that's what the party message is about. But a performance like the one Bart pulled off shows how different he is in every respect from the other politicians at the head of their lists, who are always trying to make sure they don't color outside the lines. It cannot be otherwise than that Bart's sense of humor and ability to put things in perspective has a positive effect on the mood of the undecided voter. You never know if something like this is going to be that one millimeter that pushes emotion towards the N-VA in the voting booth. Was the panda performance part of the strategy? Alas – if only I were that brilliant! Something like that is something that Bart has taken into consideration for himself. In management speak that's known as a *judgment call*, and you either have it or you don't, and it allows you to make the right decision on the basis of a gut feeling. That he also fell off the stage and has the ability to incorporate it into his speech – that's what you call a gift.

11.
AFTER THE POLLS, THE PROJECTILES

April is already well underway when Jan Blommaert writes on the news site DeWereldMorgen.be: "The election campaign is up to speed… There can be no doubt: the N-VA has the initiative and the momentum in the campaign." He also cites opinion maker and political scientist Carl Devos, who thinks that the N-VA has won the first round of the election campaign and that this round will probably continue until election day itself. Great! Now we're hearing it from another angle for a change. And moreover from deep within the leftist ranks of journalists. Normally we do research on the results of a campaign, or our clients see on the basis of hard sales figures whether – and in what way – communications have helped make progress. For a number of reasons that's not needed in this case. In the first place, we have our real time dashboard, which we have been able to use to follow all our activities right from the start. We've already been able to see how one peak in interest, views, likes, tweets, reactions, and clicking behavior is continuously followed by the next. A lot of numerical material, but easy enough to follow if you're a marketer and know where to look and how to interpret what you're seeing. Especially if – like me – every night, you read not only articles but also – especially – all the hundreds of comments that readers leave behind. What we've been able to establish is that the campaign has never once "died." The motor is always running, there is consistent interest in the N-VA website, and especially in a large number of the films with testimonials about the Commitments. In the second place, we've watched the polls come and go – on the Flemish as well as

the Walloon side – and the results have left very little to the imagination. A rising line for the N-VA, a falling line for nearly all of the other parties on the Flemish side. The N-VA scores 33% in the Flemish polls and in the RTBF poll (on the francophone side), 32.9% – the difference is too small to try and make something of, let's not pick bones about it. Interestingly – and importantly – this is 5% more than in the federal elections of 2010. The N-VA is thus well on the way of realizing its ambition to score well above 30% and thereby become an indispensable partner in any future government coalition. But, as cyclists always say in the Tour de France, "we're still a long way from Paris." The polls do little to put the other parties around the N-VA at ease – that would be one way to describe the situation. From the left and right sounds the shrill rasp of knives being sharpened, from every corner of the media. It's getting rougher all the time. In the days and weeks following the polls, it's as if everyone has carte blanche for strong words, which fly in all directions. "Homans is a second-rate candidate," toots Bruno Tobback after Liesbeth Homans states that she is prepared to take her responsibility in the post of Flemish minister-president. "That the N-VA would even think of proposing such a second-rate figure as candidate shows little respect for Flemish voters." Even the usually reserved Kris Peeters from the CD&V (Flemish Christian democrats) raises his voice to be heard. He warns against the organizational chaos that would follow should the N-VA provide the next minister-president: "The Flemish cannot afford a government that has to take a year off to study first."

One notable contribution appears on the campaign website johnenjohan.be – belonging to John Crombez and Johan Vande Lanotte (sp.a) – and takes up the cause of Arco investors (Arco is the investment arm of ACW, the Christian workers union, and suffered heavily in the collapse of Dexia Bank in 2011). It warns against the plans of the N-VA: "According to some, the ACW has to be approached first and only then can the question of whether the government has to intervene on behalf of investors be considered. I think the opposite holds: let's protect the investors first and then talk to the ACW to see what they can do, without destroying the social organization that they are," we read. "That the N-VA wants to do the opposite is logical: their loss plan entails getting rid of automatic salary indexing and denies retirees their index in 2015. If the N-VA wants to form a government with the CD&V… they will have to do everything they can to keep the Christian workers' movement quiet. Their approach to Arco makes that clear." It's not exactly considerate, trying to score points at the expense of "ordinary men and women." I don't know who the communications people behind sp.a are, but apparently they don't have their party leaders under control. Tobback, Crombez and Vande Lanotte seem to be flailing about blindly; there is little direction in the motivations behind the sp.a campaign and the way in which it is conducted, unless: all projectiles pointed at the N-VA. Whatever the case may be, it is astonishing to see how our combined approach, of Brandhome and the N-VA together, has every chance to dominate the playing field. Personally

I thought the battle for attention would be much more difficult, with more competition for steering content, more competition online. Up to this point there has been no sign of it, and May 25 is not that far away. A lot of panicky plays, that's what we're seeing. People are looking on with wide, frightened eyes at what the N-VA has set in motion or put online, instead of coming forward with things that can divert the spotlight of attention from our campaign. You can always hope for something like this in advance, and you do what you can in terms of strategy and creativity to keep the initiative in your camp, but it is still rather exceptional to see how well it's working here. We already saw it with the whole circus around the gnomes; we saw it after we put the filmed testimonials online, and darned if we aren't seeing it again when our newborn Lucas premiers on *Reyers Politiek*, accompanied by Bart De Wever and Nadia Sminate, who come tell their story. This N-VA campaign element is also plagiarized, and once again the sp.a has a hand in it. Here too, there's no sign of orchestrated direction; it is the uncontrolled action of a certain Bieke Verlinden, an unknown sp.a alderman in Leuven. "When the N-VA presented its campaign film in *Reyers Politiek* – Hi Lucas, welcome to Flanders – I was dismayed: how can a party blow hot and cold in such a way?" she trumpeted on the website of current events weekly *Knack*. So she threw together her own version of the film, with a baby of its own and a text of its own that comes over like the upthrust middle finger of a frustrated schoolmarm. You would have thought that the failed gnome copying campaign of

Bruno Tobback was enough for the party to tell its members: "People, don't do it – don't copy the N-VA any more," but evidently party discipline doesn't extend that far. If you can't keep your own leading politicians under control, let alone altogether on the same line, how do you think you can win an election, let alone lead a government or govern a country? The result is once again disastrous. The plagiarized film of the sp.a evokes more negative reactions than positive; the various social media forums have little to say about it. Where we wanted our film to do little more than cast policy resolutions into a more human, emotional form that was better able to reach out to people – particularly N-VA supporters – Bieke does the last thing she ought to do: she tries to shoot at the N-VA. Not only does she make the mistake of using an opponent's campaign material, she moreover uses it to sneer at them. People aren't stupid; they know very well what's going on and they don't like it – as attested by the number of reactions on the *Knack* website:

"Are they so stupid over there that they think they can win the elections with something like this? The sp.a is only a tenth of what it used to be, and they just keep on spewing nonsense. Once stupid, always stupid, right? Talk left, live right; where did I read that before?"

"The longer this election campaign goes on, the more childish it becomes. Are these the people who are supposed to lead us? They're just a bunch of teenage delinquents (or am I not allowed to say that?)"

"Childish negativism. Can't you say something positive for a change? Then do it now! After May 25, it may well be too late."

"And what did we learn from Bieke's little film? A disturbing lack of its own ideas, to the point that the sp.a will even copy a promotional film."

"At school you get 0 out of 10 if you copy from the smarter guy sitting next to you."

"Pure recuperation for one's own advantage. The VRT let the N-VA break the ice so that it could serve as a target for all the other parties as soon as possible. And there are even more subtle manipulations, on Reyers Laat, Terzake, or the Zevende Dag. Really small-minded of our Red Public Broadcaster."

I'll admit it right off: I've been shopping selectively among the reactions. They weren't all so negative, but the positive comments were definitely in the minority. It doesn't pay to copy. Companies and brands have known that for a long time: the more you imitate someone else, the more you're working for them instead of yourself. Moreover, the last reaction was also interesting for another reason. Apparently that gentleman also noticed that the VRT – the public broadcaster and hence paid by us all, let me repeat – did not make it easy for the N-VA, if that's possible. In the special editions of *Reyers Politiek*, every party was invited to fill in an entire episode, and

allowed to show a film that reinforced their party line. The N-VA was indeed first in line. You could say: that's logical, the leader in the polls; but as a programmer you could also say: we're saving the best for last. Not in this case. Not only could everyone take pot shots at the N-VA right away, political Flanders' favorite pastime, but it also gave later participants more time and more chance to adjust their own films if needed to what the N-VA had already presented. All in all not such a big drama, but once again a subtle play of coincidences that were not in fact coincidences. It has to be a pattern; I can't interpret it any other way. Remember Urbanus, who was dragged into *Terzake* to explain his performance at the N-VA convention? The selective, even controlling and biased way the VRT reported on the N-VA convention – at least, the last day, because they didn't show up on the first two? If they ever read this at the VRT, they will undoubtedly laugh it off as the distorted view of a paranoid N-VA advocate. That's easily done; it is the voice of the VRT against mine, or that of the ordinary viewer who happened to notice it. It is a debate that can't be won, and that I'm not going to get into. The VRT is a bastion that doesn't admit freely to its political interests. It is an old-boys' network of default positions and political correctness. The Dutch website Geen Stijl ("No Style") has come up with a word for people like that: GoodFolk. They use it consistently to dissect the *Volkskrant* and its readership. Well-chosen irony. It's as true as can be. "You're only a good person if you're a leftist," that is the kind of thinking typical of GoodFolk. It's allowed. Think whatever you like

– it's a free country. But precisely for this reason, precisely because it *is* a free country, the VRT division of the GoodFolk should refrain from trying to convince people that they are looking at an objective national broadcast. That shouldn't be allowed. A national broadcaster should not be a covert mouthpiece: neither for the left or for the right – or for anyone. They should keep far, far away from any form of influence and manipulation of the news and opinions. It happens, though. Behind the scenes – and on screen. You can get mad about it, but at the end of the day it doesn't help a thing. I knew that already. The N-VA knew it. The international public affairs agencies knew it. The commercial TV and radio broadcasters knew it. In fact, the whole of Flanders knew it, and has known it for sometime, and the realization is growing that this simply won't do. I hope the VRT decides to change its ways. Because I cannot believe that the hundreds of employees that work there day in, day out are hardened liars. No: I refuse to believe it.

Media responses are starting to have noticeably sharper teeth. Small things are greatly enlarged. Large things are milked for all they're worth, and more. Political opponents of the N-VA are given all the room they need to spout off out whatever criticism they choose. Sometimes it looks as if they were called up specifically for this purpose, if there's no actual reason to react. However you want to look at it, it's possible to speak of "everyone against the N-VA" – at any rate, there is during this stage of the election battle. On both sides

of the language boundary, the battle is growing more heated by the day. At the beginning of May, *Knack* journalist Walter Pauli writes that "the N-VA strategy recalls the game played by the Dutch at the World Cup in 1974: total soccer," and he titles his essay "Politics is War." This Pauli has understood; it is certainly true that the N-VA is not holding back, albeit not to the extent of making shamefully personal remarks about opponents. On the eve of the campaign, it is impressed upon everyone in the N-VA who had anything at all to do with the campaign – politicians, employees, members – not to resort to ad hominem attacks in the election contest. Individual campaign activities are monitored closely, including flyers and pamphlets, advertisements in any media, and warnings are issued about putting things on Facebook or Twitter without thinking twice. *Containment* has been a keyword. Keeping the emotions under control to the greatest extent possible, not making damaging statements online, not being tempted to blab something in the media – any media, even the small, local media – or to paint anyone with the ugly brush.

When the story gets out at the beginning of May that a group of six boys from the prestigious Brussels College Saint-Michel had group sex with a girl on a student retreat, the social media go wild. Within hours there are posts insinuating that one of the boys is the son of a federal minister. They even name the minister and the boy. Since the newspaper sites remove the comments, or simply make it impossible to react, everything ends up in the blogosphere and social

media that we trace in the N-VA campaign. When a colleague calls me and asks what we should do, I suddenly feel transformed into Guy Fawkes, with a match in hand and ready to ignite the bonfire under the federal parliament. I call Piet and ask him what to do. Piet doesn't hesitate for a second. It is Piet who gives me orders to do nothing, effective immediately. One stays away from the private life of one's opponents. It's simply not done. But just imagine. Imagine that one of the students was one of Bart De Wever's sons. Would Bart be spared? Think about it. Are there or are there not different weights and measures in this country? Politics is war, that much is certain; it's even a dirty war – however, that doesn't mean that you have to do what your opponent does. Bruno Tobback, who calls Bart De Wever a "vulture." Elio di Rupo, who labels the N-VA a bunch of "eunuchs in a harem." And it can be cruder than crude, as demonstrated by sp.a politicians Freya Van den Bossche and Karin Temmerman when they start singing at the top of their lungs at the labor day (May 1) gathering in Ghent: "Al wie dat niet springt" (A very crude little ditty: "Anyone who doesn't jump is a…" fill in the blank with the group of your choice that you want to demonize: gay, Jew, black, Moroccan, N-VA, etc.) When the 7 o'clock edition of the news on VRT opens later that day with an image of the jumping party, without any explanation, I realize that the VRT news service has left all sense of journalistic decency behind them… that, or they're just too dumb to realize it. When a public broadcaster allows itself to be used to promote such platitudes, things have gotten out of hand.

The behavior of Di Rupo (PS), Tobback, Van den Bossche and other sp.a politicians bears witness in the first place to the fact that they don't have much style; in the second place, it has a counterproductive effect. When I speak to a few friends after the performance of Van den Bossche and Temmerman, the only conclusion is: those among them who still doubted whether they would vote for the N-VA will now definitely vote for the N-VA. Thanks to the sp.a and the VRT news service. The proliferation of denigrating, aggressive, pedestrian communications from the other political brands causes unrest among the ranks. N-VA politicians, militants, members and supporters want to respond. But this is exactly what we mustn't do. Piet and his team have given themselves a mammoth job, but so far it's been possible to keep the campaign central. Nobody's split from the program, and that deserves a compliment. Seen from the moon, Flanders is a very small piece of ground; seen from the N-VA party headquarters, it's a gigantic playing field filled with people who can hurl their N-VA opinion into the world with the greatest of ease. That's no good; the N-VA draws enough fire as it is – from all sides. No need to start stoking the flames even higher.

That much is evident once again when headlines appear along the lines of: "Anyone who doesn't go to Dutch class can lose their living wage." In the line of fire stands Liesbeth Homans, who is the Antwerp alderman responsible for the OCMW (welfare service), and as such is "therefore" the evil spirit behind what in fact amounts

to no more than a technical adjustment to an existing regulation. People who receive a living wage from the welfare service and who don't speak Dutch are asked to learn Dutch. Anyone who misses class without a good reason three times will lose his or her wages for an undetermined period of time. There was a lawsuit, there was a judgment, there was Liesbeth Homans who disputed the judgment, but when all is said and done it was about nothing. It would probably not even have reached the press if members of the opposition within the OCMW board didn't come to them: "Look, once again you see how hard-hearted the N-VA policy is!" And the press, slavering away, just writes down whatever nonsense that comes its way. Liesbeth is someone who by nature likes to sail close to the wind, is not exactly lily-livered, and likes to take things firmly in hand. She is a role model for many women today, who complain about the macho behavior of their colleagues, equal rights for women, and much more. Not everybody is enchanted by her behavior and was probably one reason why the press sank its teeth into the business with characteristic gusto. "Deliberately misleading and confusing" is how she described it in her own words, but that's the way it goes at election time. An annoying incident, it's distracting and the effort to smooth things out takes u a lot of energy; in the end it all amounts to a hill of beans. Once more proof that everyone in the N-VA is walking on eggshells now, particularly the leading politicians. *The bigger they are, the harder they fall*, as the saying goes. And if you're going to hunt N-VA, you might as well set your sites on the big game.

It continues to surprise me that this knowledge still hasn't made anybody nervous at the N-VA. Everyone continues to work peacefully, telling the story, going out on the campaign trail, talking to the media, as if nothing were the matter. It is a close-knit team of people that support one another, coach one another; they keep each other on their toes, communicate well. It is often said that Bart De Wever runs the party like a dictator and that the N-VA is a one-man party. Bart is indisputably a major source of inspiration in the party, but I've attended enough meetings to know that the N-VA party headquarters is not North Korea. On several occasions I've had to prepare all sorts of things in terms of communication strategy and planning. I have worked together with Piet and his team on a daily basis. What I see is a well-organized group of people that work together seamlessly, that know very well what they're doing and why, and that always live up to their agreements. No hemming and hawing afterward, no time-consuming doubt, no ifs ands or buts: "Are we going to do it like this? Yes? Then we're going to do it like this." Out of experience I know countless firms who could do their employees, and shareholders, a big favor by working this way: it would yield dozens of percent more profit and create a much pleasanter work environment. I cannot possibly agree with the often explicitly expressed doubt as to the ability of the N-VA to govern, should it ever reach that point. These people are definitely ready for it. There is a well-oiled machine in the starting blocks, ready to get to work. In every respect different than that pile of rusty

gears now driving the lot. Are we going to get the chance – that's of course the question. It doesn't depend on the N-VA and it doesn't depend on the voters of this country either. It will depend on how difficult it is for the other parties to get around the N-VA. I can see in the social media that more and more ordinary people are making the click towards a government that includes the N-VA. The polls underline this fact as well. But there's still time before May 25, still time to paint the N-VA blacker than has already been tried. A lot of people still don't feel comfortable coming out with the fact that they're involved with the N-VA. "Leave my name out of it – I could lose my job," said the chairman of one health insurance company to the reporters from *De Tijd* about his ties to the N-VA. That's just crazy. That a person is apparently not safe from the repercussions of his political beliefs and risks losing his job for the simple reason that he supports a party that "they" don't approve of. That's madness. But it's still like that in this country. A bone-chilling thought, actually.

12.
VICIT VIM VIRTUS

Although you wouldn't know from the weather that we're in the middle of May, the temperature is rising in all media – especially the social media. These are the last weeks of the election campaign, which is on its last legs. These are the last weeks in which parties can still try to lure undecided voters into their camps. How they do it doesn't matter anymore, it appears. If we heard the furtive sound of knives being sharpened these last few months, now the naked blades are glimmering in the full light of the media. Nobody feels the need to show any sense of restraint. Good manners have been temporarily abolished. The tone varies from brusque and biting to downright vicious and underhanded. Now more than ever it is clear just how necessary it was to start hammering on discipline in communication from day one. That was a brilliant move on the part of Piet, Ben, Bart and Joachim. I've already mentioned that everybody involved in the N-VA campaign, and anybody involved with the party in the broadest sense of the word, has been firmly instructed not to let themselves be seduced into verbal violence. Since the campaign started, all personal communication from all individual candidates has been strictly monitored. Twitter in particular was a source of headaches. It's a fantastic medium, which we've managed to use for the N-VA campaign in a way that has proven unbelievably effective. At the same time, it is a constantly seething volcano of emotions and during election time, it is precisely where digital hotheads go to let off steam – preferably by flaming each other. It's as if you as an observer are watching a fight between neighbors that's gotten completely

out of hand, where eventually the whole street jumps in and it's impossible to call the police. Of course a few people associated with the N-VA let themselves go – it's hardly avoidable. Every now and then someone has had to intervene, and firmly request that all tweets stay positive. No kicking those who are down, no insults, no personal vendettas. Instead, be the bearer of content; share the message of the N-VA brand in a positive way. That was the plan and that's how it was carried out. Twitter in particular was singled out for a highly restrictive communications policy.

Keep communication channels and information channels nice and clean: no communication without relevant information. It looks easy, but it's incredibly difficult. After all, human beings are social animals, and after starvation, solitary confinement is the cruelest method of breaking a person's spirit. So asking people to stifle their reactions is unnatural: it hurts, but it has to be endured. The N-VA also made the V-fingers available to its twittering members in this, the wonderful world of online communication. As an avatar, so it is immediately clear who is a declared N-VA party member and who isn't. It's useful to know in the heat of battle, and it helps keep everything in line. Whoever uses the V-icon in a tweet probably realizes at that moment more than ever that he or she is in a certain sense speaking on behalf of the N-VA. It would be going too far to say that you would then feel like an N-VA ambassador, but it will certainly serve as a reminder that you don't exactly do the party any

favors by wishing twitterers with another point of view a warm place in hell. It's hard on the N-VA communications team, but it brings results. In spite of the fact that an inappropriate word pops up here and there in the social media, there is not one online riot caused by an unconsidered or inflammatory tweet by an N-VA member or supporter. No one goes against the carefully thought-out guidelines laid out by Piet and his team.

That our opponents would persevere in giving impetus to the N-VA story is something we never dared to hope. The harsh tone was cranked up a notch during the festivities of May 1. Labor Day was used to the fullest to pitch into the N-VA with every available comrade. Philippe De Coene, sp.a alderman in Kortrijk and on the list of candidates for the Flemish Parliament, attacked the N-VA in his speech by quoting the socialist leader Jean Jaurès, who was murdered in Paris: *"Nationalisme, c'est la guerre"* – nationalism is war. In slogans and speeches, the N-VA brand acronym is twisted around to "N-VA stands for 'Nu Voluit Achteruit' (Full Throttle Reverse, instead of Progress)." How striking that only the N-VA comes in for such direct attacks, and none of the other parties. Even more striking given that the party did not even have the chance to participate in the governing coalition at the federal level these past few years. And the childish ditty that politicians Van den Bossche and Temmerman danced to in the Vrijdagmarkt in Ghent, pffft – we've already been over that. In both Flanders and Wallonia, the socialist labor unions

and insurance companies have closed ranks with "their" party. An unprecedented groundswell of socio-political compartmentalization – against which the other parties have been fighting for decades. I look on with astonishment. Compartmentalization is making a comeback, if it was ever gone in the first place. A front is formed against the N-VA, the MR and the extreme left, PVDA. "We need sp.a, now more than ever," said ABVV leader Rudy De Leeuw. The electoral advice of Rudy De Leeuw, chairman of the socialist labor union, is loud and clear: vote against the N-VA by voting for the sp.a. Paul Callewaert, leader of the socialist mutualities, makes a two-day tour of Ghent, Antwerp and Ostend to win votes for the sp.a. What stands out even more than the vivid speeches and red banners during the May 1 celebrations is the clarification of the socialist position, the formation of a unified front between party, labor union, mutualities and media. "Not that we formulated a centralized strategy," explains De Leeuw, "but we all realize that the moment of truth is at hand. Who's going to ensure that the welfare state is not dismantled?" It is one big front against the N-VA, that much is clear. "The V-plan of the N-VA calls for a 5.7 billion euro cut in healthcare," sneers Callewaert in Antwerp. "Cancer treatment can easily run up to 400,000 euros. Who's going to be paying after May 25?" In Ghent, Freya Van den Bossche was ready with her answer: "The right thinks you have to take care of yourself; we think everyone has to take care of each other."

It's amazing how much desperation is concealed in these words. Attack after attack: it's not about themselves, or their own message, it's about the N-VA. The old adage "fear sells" is what the sp.a is using to maneuver their supporters into a united front. An adage, moreover, that is based on an antiquated view of communications. An adage that is obsolete – but it says a great deal about the sp.a and how they look at the world around them. Is this the sp.a? Is this really the party that supposedly stood up for secular humanism in overwhelmingly Catholic Belgium when I was twelve, and practically the only person in my ethics class? I watch, I listen, I read – these are instructive days for a strategist who is participating in his first-ever political campaign. I'm surprised that so many other parties and their supporters make so many fundamental mistakes. But nobody seems to notice.

In the week before the elections – hence in the middle of the restriction period, when the law forbids paid online political advertisements – the labor unions get around Belgian election law. They use their status as "unions" to launch a campaign on the social media encouraging people to vote against the N-VA. The Open VLD (Flemish liberals) gets around the election laws by using their European campaign for figurehead Guy Verhofstadt as a means of getting more attention. Apart from the question of whether this is underhanded or clever, it's still *negative campaigning*. *Negative campaigning* is a distinctly American concept that even in its land

of origin leaves a bad taste in people's mouths. It no longer fits in with the spirit of the times. The new trend is that people look for stories that can help them connect, that give hope, that paint a picture of the future, that state the facts and discuss problems, that can be shared as a part of finding a solution. What an irony: while the massive leftist army of labor union folks and socialists could be offering stories of freedom and equality, stories that embody a warm glow and feeling of optimism, they waste all their speech and media time demonizing the N-VA and everything that is right-wing or even vaguely looks like it. How stupid can you be? From the moment of our very first conversation with the N-VA, it was clear to both the N-VA and Brandhome that we would not be running an "anti" campaign, but a "for" campaign. Based on content and grafted onto the emotions of hope and trust, connection, change and progress. Our communications have never been about "anti" feelings. The N-VA politicians have not descended into sarcastic commentary on the plans of others. Even when Bart De Wever focused the discussion on the contrast between the status quo, represented by the PS model, and change as embodied by the N-VA model, he always kept to the facts.

A strategic consideration: with the finish in sight, it is important to be able to summarize what lies at the core of the choice the voter is making. This is different than booing and hissing at everything that is not "leftist" from the nation's podiums. I have a strong feeling

that even among supporters of the left, people are starting to get tired of this approach. And my nightly reading of the blogosphere – along with our dashboards – confirm it. I can sympathize. From actual leaders you expect more than just ad hominem attacks. You don't do anyone any favors that way, you don't win any hearts and you don't win any minds. In the US, the Republicans once went so far over the line that they said Obama was not an American citizen. It didn't get them one extra vote. Learn from history; look around you and see how the world is; see and feel what works and above all what doesn't: for us at Brandhome extensive research is a habit, and in this case – new territory, a political campaign – we did even more than usual. I'm glad, because it led to the observation that the age of positive campaigning is upon us, together with grassroots thinking – campaigning from the bottom up and from the inside out. As campaign makers, strategically as well as creatively, we knew in advance that we would never have 100% control over what happens in the political arena. What is said in the media and written about the party as a whole and about individual politicians is something you never have in hand. This is also true of what N-VA politicians say in public, how they react to news or to the various positions of their opponents. For this reason we focused so hard on winning over the man and woman on the street – who in this day and age might better be called "the man and woman on Facebook." We thought we could realize significant profits there.

First because it fits 100% with the ambition to make the N-VA much more acceptable and "normal" for many more people. Second, because via the social media, we should be able to succeed in contacting people and bringing them closer to the N-VA, its motivations and its policies. Third, because social media are easy to monitor and provide a great deal of useful information, so that you can guide, adjust, dose, delay or accelerate your communication as needed. I think that modern communication will increasingly take this form, for large companies as well as small businesses. For an amount that is much less than what the press reported, we were able to achieve this online. I have read reports in which one has assumed that the N-VA spent millions on its social media campaign. If that's the perception, it says everything about the effectiveness of our social media efforts and those of the N-VA team. It worked, and it changed forever the way political parties will run their campaigns. This too is Change for Progress.

In my view, advertising in its traditional form is dead and buried. The world of social media is not one that should be filled with hollow *buy me* phrases, but with stories that can be shared, and that can connect people with brands and organizations. This necessitates a different way of thinking, not only for communications agencies but also within companies and organizations. This is another one of the most admirable aspects of the N-VA: that they dared to go for it 100%! From our side, it's one thing to propose and develop

something like this; it's another to have the courage to say "yes" when facing the Mother of all Elections. The folks at the N-VA, for their part, really enjoyed making this manner of conducting a campaign their own. One of the finest examples in my opinion is Manneken Peace, a hilarious take on the famous Brussels statuette Manneken Pis, which Piet De Zaeger thought of using is advertising property for the Brussels N-VA campaign by letting it make the V-sign. He understood quite well how you have to come up with items like this to keep the motor of social media running. Manneken Peace, with t-shirt and all, meant more than just scoring points briefly in the public domain. Manneken Peace was a jolly addition to the N-VA gnomes, fit perfectly in the campaign and generated a fresh wave of attention in the social media. This kind of thing softens the pain of the threats and hatred that have surfaced every since it became known that Brandhome was the agency behind the N-VA campaign. The helpless sense of rage this dredges up still hasn't left me, but helps to see that what we do develops as it was intended to. I know, it looks like I'm playing the part of the injured soul; but that's ok too. Still, I cannot deny that the hate launched my way has left its mark. At any rate this campaign has done a good job of cleaning up my list of contacts – that's one thing for certain. I hear the same from my colleagues at Brandhome as well.

In this last stage of the campaign, we're busy preparing one last advertisement that will be placed right before the elections and

a Thunderclap action for the morning of election day itself. Another one of those new means available to us communications folk, one we have to learn to use. Thunderclap is what it says: it is a message bomb from what is known as a *crowdspeaking platform*. It enables you to allow a huge number of people to share the same message via social media within a specific period of time. For the time being a potentially powerful weapon to get a lot of people behind an ideal message at the same time, but I think there will also be opportunities to use it for commercial marketing ends. More than one million Flemings constituted the potential range of the Thunderclap. But we already managed to reach more than five million before we even organized the Thunderclap: we leaked information prematurely to the friends of the press – who did the rest of the work for us. While we send out the very last newspaper advertisements daily, we look past election day on May 25 and into the future. Because we may assume that whatever happens, the N-VA will be the big winner at the elections and we need to work on a "thank you" to the members and voters. Momentum is an iron that has to be struck while still hot. It's not only good to say thank you to all those who contributed to our election success for their hard work and trust – it also can't hurt to try and get more people to become members of the party. The more personal engagement, the better. Moreover, it's important for a political party to extend and deepen the talent pool. More members have meant more opportunities to find new political and managerial talent. In the end it's not a parlor game that's being

played here – in the end it's about governing communities, social welfare organizations, regions and federal institutions. As a party it's important to have enough good people ready for the moment you actually have to take responsibility for bearing part of the load on several levels at once.

And then something unexpected happens: on May 15, 2014, Jean-Luc Dehaene passes away. The plumber of Belgian politics, as it were. Calling Jean-Luc a "notable" would be the understatement of the century. His influence on the political landscape and even on the whole of Belgian society has been immense. An unusual personality, who knew how to build bridges in places where the other side wasn't even visible. His passing changes the atmosphere. The respect of all politicians for Dehaene is great, and is quickly decided – after the example of the CD&V – to put a temporary halt to all political campaigns. The debate among party leaders planned for that week is canceled. And it will never be rescheduled. The media are full of recollections of Dehaene from every angle, nook and cranny of politics. Unavoidably the question arises as to whether his passing will have an influence on the outcome of the elections. I think I know the answer. It's like that article in *De Morgen* says: "That CD&V isn't going to lose on account of it, is clear." Never underestimate the value of the sympathy vote. Moments like this are tipping points, where everything can turn around in the blink of an eye. Dehaene was respected by millions of people for who he

was and how he approached things. What also comes into play is that, in contrast to the other parties, the CD&V *is* allowed to keep communicating right now. Not their political messages, of course, but they stay in the picture, are involved in the memorial service, the funeral, and so on. Little things help and May 25 is just around the corner. Even I'm affected by the loss of Jean-Luc. I interviewed him years ago for my first book, entitled *Brandhome Platform I: Over Maatschappij, Mens en Merk* (Brandhome Platform I: On Society, People and Brands). On Wednesday morning, July 10, 2002, at 8:20 a.m., to be precise, I'm with Dehaene in his office in the city hall of Vilvoorde, and he says the following: "When an emotional incident takes place three weeks before the elections, it brings with it entirely different results. Everything you've managed to achieve political in recent years is suddenly forgotten by everyone." He was talking about the massive losses suffered by what was then the CVP, predecessor of the CD&V, in the federal elections of 1999 as a result of the Dioxin crisis. Several months ago, in December, I had reread all the input from that conversation with Dehaene very carefully. That precisely such a tipping point risk was coming up thanks to the death of the man who explained to me those very risks seemed a remarkable coincidence. Seemed like, though I doubt it: coincidence doesn't exist. In the multitude of commentaries that followed, no one missed a chance to assail the N-VA with unkind remarks. The chance was not missed for writing that Dehaene "was annoyed at the stubbornness of the N-VA." And he was no fan of Bart De Wever,

because "someone who can't make compromises doesn't belong in politics." There: at least someone said it! I have seen this message appear in a variety of forms. That, contrary to popular belief, Bart De Wever actually got on quite well with Dehaene and had coffee (or a good glass of whisky) with him at home on several occasions doesn't seem to have made it into print quite so often. Did it influence the elections in the end? Did it eventually cost the N-VA votes? Or not at all? Who can say. As a marketeer I have the feeling that the death of Dehaene did in fact give the CD&V that tiny little advantage they still needed not to shrink any further than the polls had already predicted. It's difficult to prove. Feeling. I know too much about communication and attention to underestimate the value of the near-exclusive extra media attention for CD&V, for the political leaders of CD&V past and present who all get to speak their piece in honor of CD&V figurehead Dehaene. It can only have yielded extra votes – how could it be otherwise – but how many is anyone's guess.

What certainly generated votes for the N-VA in those last May days is the accumulation of mistakes made by sp.a politicians and supporters – especially the double interview by Prime Minister Di Rupo and Vice Minister Vande Lanotte published in *De Standaard* on May 15, two days after Bart De Wever ate PS top man Paul Magnette's lunch in the national debate. In just a few days, online opinion began to have the feeling that the existing political order wanted to perpetuate itself at any cost. When I read the blogs that evening,

I know: the N-VA is going to win the elections. The sp.a knows that they overplayed their hand more than once. They know they're going to lose. It's like a boxing match. One minute you lose your legs, the next minute you know you're finished. Your opponent smells blood, literally and figuratively. I smell it now. They're bleeding – not only from the heart, but from their soul. Through blind arrogance, abuse of their supporters on the left, the demonization of their own militant wing, and so on, they contributed to the success of the N-VA without even knowing. Pride cometh before a fall. Now they're going to fall.

On the evening of May 25 it appears that the N-VA campaign has achieved the party's ambitious goal of winning "more than 30% of the votes." The counter stops at 32.4%. It could have been 35% or even 40% if the N-VA had fought with comparable weapons and if they had not met such resistance from all sides. Still, 32.4% of the votes – one third of all the votes in Flanders – is a result worth celebrating. On Sunday evening, May 25, in the Viage – the Grand Casino of Brussels – I'm there. Together with the members of the Brandhome team who worked on N-VA. I've also brought my wife. That is to say: I've dragged her along. My wife doesn't like politics – especially not Belgian politics. But I convinced her to come with me, so she can see what I've been up to for the past few months. The days, nights, weeks and months in which she has scarcely seen me. When we arrive at the Viage, you can hardly walk without stumbling over a journalist. Certainly when a foreign journalist takes us for

important politicians and starts taking photos when my chauffeur drops us off at the entrance. Funny. My wife and I can laugh about it. Inside, the Viage is bubbling with positive energy. Victory is being celebrated here, that's clear. When, after some delay, Bart and the entire N-VA leadership enter the room with hands upheld in the V-sign, the applause goes through the roof. Total pandemonium – almost frighteningly intense – with cameras, photographers, press, electronic flash, an incredible crush of people and thunderous noise. When Bart addresses the room, he does so with relative calm. He realizes, apart from all the glory, that the real fight has now begun in earnest. The fight for Wetstraat 16 – seat of government in Brussels – the fight for the country, the fight to put Change for Progress into practice. The results are such that it looks as if it will be a hell of a job to form a government coalition – PS is by far the largest party on the other side of the language boundary. I admire Bart and his team. And I especially admire the women and men behind that team. The partners and families who have to live, day in, day out, in the strange film filled with drama, comedy, and even fiction that is politics. I have seen part of it. A fraction. What I will always remember is the story that the wife of Ben Weyts told me. On May 24, one day before the elections, an unknown person had set Ben's campaign car on fire. Ben and his wife drove that morning to the N-VA Members' Day in Planckendael with their two kids in the back seat. They and their two children were the first to see the burned out campaign vehicle. What do you say then to your kids then, when they see their

father's car on fire? Definitely not what the court said, even before an investigation had been conducted: "We are sure that the fire was not politically motivated."

That's not all that happens that day. Later that afternoon, Brussels is shaken up by an attack in broad daylight. An armed man shoots and kills four people in cold blood at the Jewish Museum. Horrible. An act of terrorism, hate and intolerance in the heart of the European capital. An act that robbed four innocent people of their lives and laid waste to the lives of their families and friends. The first reactions from politicians follow shortly. After all, it's May 24, eve of the elections – perhaps there's still a vote or two to be won. When I read the reactions online that evening, I'm revolted at what I find. Various opponents and their supporters have no scruples against using this terroristic attack to place the N-VA in the camp of "extreme right-wing threat." Pure and utter nonsense. Unbelievable. While these people are trying to make themselves sound more interesting with all manner of sick messages, or making opportunistic expressions of sympathy and compassion, it is Bart De Wever who immediately takes the necessary steps in Antwerp to protect the Jewish community. No words, deeds. I have to think back on a conversation I had a few months ago with a close acquaintance, an American investor of the highest caliber. A man that has achieved a great deal in his professional life: wealth, power, victory, intellectual contentment, and the like. "The left talks, the right acts," he told me.

"That's always been the case. But do you have to go all the way to the right? Or all the way to the left? Neither one. Because extreme right begins at the extreme left, and vice versa. Always remember that, Erik." Years ago, I met him by chance. Immensely rich, not that you could tell by looking. After spending a week in the same hotel, and pleasantries over breakfast, I only found out who he was at the end of his stay. A full-blooded capitalist, but more of the type: *the only scarce capital is human capital*. I also contacted him a few weeks ago, when I temporarily lost my way. In the meantime an offer has come in. It reminds me of our first concepts for the campaign. One of those concepts was "from left to right and from there forward." Now that we're approaching the end of this campaign, I'm also asking myself if we will still be able to make the binary distinction between left and right in the future. Does that really add anything? If you ask me, it's no longer about whether you're left or right, but whether you want to move forward. Enough thinking already. Politics is not my bag. That evening I send an sms to Bart De Wever: "Bart, tomorrow you'll be standing on the shoulders of giants." I still had that sms lying around somewhere, because on the eve of the city council elections in 2012, I sent him the same message. As always, I got a brief, brisk sms in return: "Tx."

It is now May 25, 11:58 p.m. I'm sitting in my office at home in Antwerp. For the first time in months, I'm not reading blogs, not re-watching broadcasts, not reading newspapers. It's finished.

It's over. This is it. The N-VA won. The N-VA did not miss its date with history. The journey that my team, the N-VA team, a number of loyal partners and I have made since we first embarked in July 2013 has been long and intense. A journey that can be summed up in a single word: courage. A lot of courage.

"Vicit vim Virtus: courage has conquered violence."
Bart De Wever, May 25, 2014, 9:02 p.m.

AFTERWORD

This last chapter of the book is being written Sunday, July 27, 2014. Last week I finished proofreading the other chapters. It's ready. I have transformed my content & contact log into a readable book. But a number of things have happened this week, so I thought it necessary to add an afterword.

A Flemish government was formed this week, Bourgeois I: a coalition of the N-VA, CD&V and Open VLD. It's a real pleasure to read the title of the Flemish government accord: "Trust, Connect, Progress." The reference to the Change for Progress campaign could be clearer. And it looks as if these coalition partners will also form a federal government with the French-speaking liberals of the MR. And Wallonia also has its coalition. Great.

A few weeks ago it didn't look like it, that all this would happen. Bart De Wever tried everything as *informateur* (the politician who, in the name of the crown, investigates whether a particular coalition will be able to form a successful cabinet), but had to return to the king empty handed after a fruitless search for federal coalition partners. Things weren't going smoothly on the Flemish side either. Slowly

I began to have the feeling that it will have all been for nothing. I had to think back on what Bart De Wever said to me last year: "Even if we win the elections, everything and everyone will be mobilized against us to keep us out of the government, certainly on a federal level." As it turns out, that was no exaggeration. That Bart would soon run up against walls of political unwillingness was easy enough to predict; that's the game and that's how it's always played. All those fruitless conversations with all possible coalition partners gave hope to everyone with even the slightest bit of rancor regarding the N-VA's victory that the party could still be defeated in the end. The jokes are starting again, the sneers in the press, the sniggering commentary. This is Belgium at its most Belgian, I think to myself. It never stops here, that clammy favoritism, all those cross-connections between politics and business – maybe it's just not possible to break through after all those decades of being ruled by the old boys network. Make no mistake about it: the world isn't sitting around waiting for Belgium or Flanders. At least, not for the way the old boys network does business. The power that brings with it melts like snowflakes in the heat of the world economy we participate in today, and in fact they have a lot of catching up to do. Catching up in terms of mentality in the broadest sense of the word. Luckily everything seems to be working itself out. I hope so, anyway. Time will tell.

Since May 25, we have also run a post-campaign with the N-VA team. Indeed: a pre-campaign, a campaign and a post-campaign.

Just as you need to bring a campaign up to speed with a pre-campaign, you also need to wind things down to normal with a post-campaign. From our Brandhome research into political campaigns at the beginning of this project, it was plain to see that people usually make the mistake of placing a "thank you" advertisement in the newspapers on the day after the elections, and that's that. With the N-VA we decided not to do that. You don't even have to explain it to Piet, Ben, Joachim, Bart – in short, the whole N-VA team – why a post-campaign is important. They have sense enough to figure it out for themselves. After May 25, we did in fact continue with a post-campaign for a number of weeks, in which we shifted the focus to communication with the members and voters. To thank them for their trust and to acquire more N-VA members. The membership drive is running full steam ahead. It's still satisfying to see that the strategy of conducting a largely online campaign, launched last year, turned out to be the right choice. Patting ourselves on the back? That of the N-VA? That of Brandhome? My own? Whoever wants to read it that way has my permission. Just don't forget that it's easier to make the wrong choices than to make the right ones. Whether it's for a large company, a new brand, or as in this case a political campaign. Everything depends on the analysis you make, the possibilities you see and the decision you take to go a certain direction. You encounter so many intersections before a campaign idea even comes in view that there is a greater chance you'll take a wrong turn than the right one. You can make all the logical arguments you want about which

one is the right one, but you'll only be proven right (or wrong) after the fact. It's an exciting business, what we do together. Nothing is given and if it all works out anyway, if all the pieces of the puzzle fall into place, if what you hope indeed turns out to be true and even surpasses all expectations, then we're proud. The journey we've made with and for the N-VA has been a demanding one. Not only for professional reasons, but for personal reasons as well. It's rather exceptional that it never happened this way before. That makes the whole campaign all the more memorable. What we encountered often struck me as bizarre, unreal or simply too ridiculous for words. I take a grim pleasure in the fact that Bart and his party seem to be giving this country the change that it needs. I harbor no grudges against all the people and things that worked against us, whether fairly or unfairly. I hope that for many among them the medicine will be bitter, but that they will yet be cured of their narrow-minded ideas.

Every experience makes you richer. This experience was particularly enriching. As a person, as a professional and as an entrepreneur I learned a great deal from it, and this period has given me energy. It has changed me.

As a *person*, I learned that there are no friends in politics, and that you evidently lose a lot of them when you work for the N-VA. On the other hand, I've made new friends. But I believe in the good

in people, and some of my "ex-friends" will probably come face to face with themselves in terms of their small-minded ideas. I'll see you guys later.

As a *professional*, I learned that the level of marketing and communication in the Belgian and Flemish markets is indeed far below the international standard. Among other things, this is shown by the blindness with which our opponents helped build our campaign. And that's a pity. Because it will prove to be a decisive element in helping to make Flemish, Walloon and Belgian businesses successful internationally. For those who still don't get it: the borders are open.

As an *entrepreneur*, I learned that Brandhome as a company has to make a number of choices. And so do I. The decision has been made in the meantime to reduce our classic activities sooner than anticipated. That part of our profession is dying out. We will continue with several small but highly effective nuclei in the most interesting (inter)national markets. With a focus on businesses, organizations and brands that really want to change: *challengers, challenging, turn-arounds, market-entrants*. These are the keywords for sharpening our strategy.

Working in an atmosphere of total transparency, trust, safety and respect. That is the *modus operandi* that gives brands and businesses

a surplus value in competitive markets. It is the most effective way to enter (un)known markets, to be more effective, and to work in a way that is more cost-effective.

The personal attacks on my family and me, just because I was doing my job well, have made me think about my future in this country. It marked me. It made me a bit more mature, and a bit less trusting. I don't want to dramatize, but I have seen and experienced close at hand the fact that this is less of a free country than we think. It is sad, because this country has so much to offer; there is so much pleasure to be had. But if you aren't free to do business in a normal way, to do your job in a normal way, if you have to be careful who you come into professional contact with – that's questionable. For the time being I'm not giving up. The success of the N-VA campaign has also given me new energy. There are enough new contacts who don't have any difficulty taking our collaboration with the N-VA in a professional way. They see in Brandhome that special something they were missing in their existing partners. Brandhome is ready for them. Flanders and Wallonia in the meantime as well. And who knows, maybe Belgium too.

At any rate, my bag is half packed. If change doesn't come, I'm out of here. Where change isn't possible, talent has nothing left to gain.

Now is the time for change.
Now is the time for progress.

It's time for Change for Progress.

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At the end of extreme left

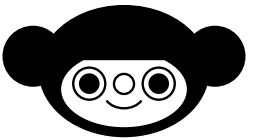
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Publisher Brandhome publishing
Falconplein 30, 2000 Antwerp, Belgium

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ISBN 9789077163115 NUR 803/810 D/2014/9616/2

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