

# The future is forward, it's time for Groen!

*Election programme summary*

## What is at stake?

Over the past few months we have been confronted with the worst crisis in many years. The social, financial, economic and climate crises are interconnecting and require an effective and above all comprehensive solution. These crises didn't just fall out of the sky without any warning. To a large extent, they were the result of years of wrong or unbalanced policies. For years, politicians in the traditional parties defended 'deregulation' policies, social protection took second place to promoting a one-sided economy based on conventional economic growth, and we did not make any real ecological changes towards a way of life that respects the limits of people and planet.

It would be a particularly bad idea to tackle this crisis again with old formulas, because if we do this, we're already preparing the next crisis. Now is the time to change course and fully embrace policies that deal with this multifaceted crisis credibly with other formulas, which *can* safeguard the future.

All Greens, united in the European Green Party, unambiguously support a *Green New Deal*. This is an ambitious political programme that resolutely supports green investment in the economy, which simultaneously ensures a multitude of sustainable green jobs, innovation and a new dynamic, and is also the key to tackling the climate challenge. In the meantime, all reports have shown that postponing climate measures will cost society much more, in terms of quality of environment and economic opportunities, than if we take action to create a green economy and a sustainable energy system right now. It was striking to see that in the past few months, there was worldwide support for the green answer to the crisis. In the meantime, what the green parties have been saying for years is being recognised by more and more people as the most realistic and future-orientated answer to the challenges of today.

There is much at stake in the elections on 7 June. Now other parties are also acknowledging that green policies are not luxuries, but on the contrary, clever and believable answers to the questions which we, as a society, must find answers to in the coming years. Now more than ever, there is a need for a strong representation of the green parties in the different parliaments. After all, a so-called "green" image cannot be used as an alibi to continue the policies that have led to this mess.

The green political movement rests on a coherent body of thought. For green politicians there is no difference between the points of view that they support in a regional, national or European parliament. More than any other political movement, we have always emphasised the connection between choices made at local level and at the level of Flanders or Brussels, and the consequences on a larger scale. More than anyone else, we have always advocated a strong political Europe that *does* support ecological sustainability, social protection and international responsibility, because this ensures an increase in the quality of life close at hand, in Flanders or Brussels. The programme that the green candidates are defending for the Flemish, Brussels or European Parliament is also coherent and logical. And voters who elect more green members of parliament in our country consequently strengthen the international green political movement. And if that's not a useful vote, what is?

## What are we proposing?

1 A green economy
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In the past few months it has become clear to everyone that a market organised according to neoliberal principles has failed. The financial bubble of bad credit and the unilateral pursuit of profit has burst painfully. The illusion of unrestrained economic growth has also been smashed to pieces. There are limits to the capacity of people and the environment. We urgently need a new economic model. An economy where we measure progress in a new way and take into account well-being, jobs, living environment and quality. An economy where the blind pursuit of growth is replaced by the pursuit of well-being.

### **A green economy means more jobs and less pollution**

The Greens are asking for a drastic and comprehensive solution to the crisis, and that solution is the Green New Deal. Throughout Europe, we want an ambitious programme that will green the economy, thus ensuring more jobs and less environmental waste. It is important that we tackle this at European level. This is the only way that we can be strong enough and prevent any negative competition arising to the disadvantage of the environment. At European level this means that the green plan will create 5 million new green jobs over a period of five years. Translated to Flanders, in the next ten years this amounts to investing one billion euro in a green economy each year. In this way, we want to create 100 000 green jobs by 2020.

Each year, Groen! wants to convert 100 000 homes in Flanders into low-energy homes. So 100 000 families will see their energy bills and CO<sub>2</sub> emissions halved. This will also be a boost for the building sector.

Groen! believes in clean, clever and socially-minded products. Investing in green technology and innovation will be decisive for the competitive strength of our companies. And in Flanders there are already a lot of people working in the reuse sector and the waste and recycling industry. If we already turn to the ecological development of products now, thousands of new jobs can still be created.

But we also want to stimulate sustainable choices in the chemical and steel sectors. Petrochemicals can be transformed into a biochemical industry that will revolve around sustainable organic raw materials. In steel production too, CO<sub>2</sub> emissions can be further reduced.

### **Taking action for a healthy living environment**

Groen! is making a stand for a healthy living environment. We're concerned about the quality of the air, water and soil, but also about the environment within the home, about healthy and tasty food, about less noise and less radiation. Groen! always puts health first. We want to gear environmental and health standards to the health risks for vulnerable groups such as children, the elderly, pregnant women, asthma sufferers and heart patients.

Groen! wants to get radical about clean air. Releasing exhaust fumes and polluted particles in public property is not something that should be happening in this day and age. We must have the ambition to go for clean production, clean energy and clean travel. Zero-emissions must be the target standard. This is only possible if we choose structural change; by opting for less motorised transport, riding our bikes more and using more public transport and clean vehicles. Factories must also be cleaner. We advocate permanent speed limits on motorways, particle filters on all diesel engines, subsidies for people purchasing a cleaner car, for green leasing cars and government cars and for environmental zones in cities where polluting cars are not permitted. But the industry can also do much better. We want negotiable emissions allowances not only for CO<sub>2</sub>, but also for other pollutants such as NO<sub>x</sub>.

Groen! wants to move away from a throwaway economy towards a reuse and recycle economy. Where waste becomes a raw material once again, where reusing and recycling will be the rule and not the exception. The Flemish government is suffering from 'leader fear'. Flanders is a champion when it comes to the selective collection of household waste and soil decontamination and the government now wants to put the brakes on. We find that rather ignorant. On the contrary, we should capitalise on our leading position and convert it into new jobs. In the field of industrial waste we can do much better. The fact that we still dump electrical waste in Africa or China is scandalous. There are no clean waste incinerators. There is always a negative effect on health. If we can really implement a 'cradle to cradle' system (reusing waste as a raw material) then we will not need any new incinerators. Cleaning up the many soil pollution blackspots in Flanders must become a priority once

more. This Flemish government has just reduced efforts and relaxed the standards. This is particularly short-sighted. Groen! wants to prioritise soil protection. The fertility of our soils must urgently be restored.

Clean water is important for our health, it is a basic right: fresh and affordable drinking water, clean water in which to swim, rain water without poisonous residues, reliable water as a raw material for (food) production, clean streams and rivers are the arteries of a healthy environment. Flanders has already invested billions in water purification infrastructure over the past few years. And yet Flanders has not reached the European objectives. Groen! wants 80% of our watercourses to have a good to very good biological water quality by 2020. If we make these investments in the short-term, they will immediately create green jobs.

### **More green instead of more concrete**

Throughout Europe we are still going in the wrong direction when it comes to transport policy. We expect too much of transport via cars and lorries, and there is still too little ambition to embrace the most environmentally friendly technology. It goes without saying that air pollution is still alarming, and traffic is still gobbling up nature and open spaces. Flanders is no different, on the contrary. Premier Kris Peeters and his catholic-blue-red government want to turn Flanders into Europe's logistical hub. They support 'Vlaanderen Transitland' (Flanders Transit Country), and consequently dozens of new 'concrete projects' which will destroy many open spaces and natural areas. Groen! wants more nature instead of more concrete. Here we refer to the Lange Wapper in Antwerp, the widening of the ring road around Brussels, the new container dock on top of the village of Doel, the Schipdonk canal in West-Flanders and the north-south link in Limburg... This choice of policy cannot be defended. Absorbing transport flows hardly creates added economic value. New roads are immediately filled up again. In addition, more traffic means more noise and even more particulate matter.

Groen! would prefer to mobilise more transport by rail, have more trams and Light Rails, better public transport and comfortable cycle routes and develop a network of electric cars and charging stations with green power. If Flanders and Brussels were to fully embrace this green option, ensuring that our country finally supports ecological choices in the EU, then it could play a pioneering role for a different type of development, instead of continuing to opt for solutions from the past.

The Peeters government has not met the objectives of the Ruimtelijk Structuurplan Vlaanderen (Flanders Environmental Structure Plan) for more nature and woods in any respect. Each day, 8 ha of open space -the equivalent of 16 football pitches- disappears. In contrast, there has been growth of as much as 6 800 ha industrial estates, equivalent to 13 600 football pitches. A third of all plant and animal species in Flanders is threatened with extinction.

Groen! wants a recovery plan for nature and open spaces in Flanders. We want to banish the myth that wealth and employment can only be created by destroying open spaces and nature. Quite the opposite is true. The delineation work carried out by the Vlaams Ecologisch Netwerk (Flemish Ecological Network - VEN) must be finished off by the end of 2010, and the delineation of areas where agriculture can be interlaced with nature (IVON) by the end of 2012. Once again, more natural areas must urgently be acquired in order to reach the declared objective of 50 000 ha of nature reserve. Many woods now have a different allocation in the regional zoning plan and may be harvested at any time. Groen! wants a regularisation of these non zoning regulated woods. And on top of that, more woods!

We want to turn Brussels into a real eco-capital. This can be done by combining high city density with arteries of water, greenery and nature that wrap themselves around the city like fingers. They ventilate the city, provide a place for nature (development) and are the city's ecological buffers.

### **Flanders and Brussels at the top in the fight against climate change**

At the end of this year, another important climate conference will take place, this time in Copenhagen. This will be the moment of truth. Copenhagen will set out the objectives for the period after Kyoto (2012). Groen! wants Flanders and Brussels to be among the leading European regions when it comes to ecological innovation.

Together with its Walloon sister party Ecolo, Groen! served a climate bill in the Chamber of Representatives establishing a yearly reduction of 3% of CO<sub>2</sub> emissions. In order to reach this objective we will have to change our system and green our economy. Small steps will not be enough.

Sadly the path to Copenhagen is still long for Flanders. The region is really not doing very well. We are still lagging behind. Our performance is mediocre because our Flemish and federal governments don't dare make any choices. Our leaders are happy to go for green electricity but at the same time they still opt for nuclear power stations, coal power stations, storing CO<sub>2</sub> underground and biofuels where often something is not quite right. The money that our governments are pumping into nuclear power stations cannot be invested in the genuinely clean technologies of the future such as renewable energy from wind, sun and water. Opting for nuclear power stations is playing the ostrich: the risks are misunderstood, the supply uncertain and we are passing on the problems of nuclear waste which remains active for thousands of years to future generations.

Groen! wants to make clear choices where permits or money for new wind turbines are concerned. The wind projects in the North Sea must not come to a stop due to the financial crisis. We must also bring in a solar roof plan for Flanders and Brussels, whereby individuals or schools can rent their roofs to energy companies and in return, receive cheap green power.

### **Switching on green energy Europe-wide**

You can't tackle the climate challenge alone. The problems go beyond borders, the solutions must do likewise. One part of the European Green New Deal which the Greens are advocating is a powerful European green energy policy. We thus support the formation of 'ERENE', a European Community for Renewable Energy, the green alternative to the current Euratom. It is perfectly possible to develop a sustainable power supply without nuclear power and without new coal power stations, but then we must think at European level. On the European continent we can develop all forms of energy (sun, wind, water) and make them available via a smart grid. We can save a lot more energy by investing massively in low-energy buildings or technologies such as cogeneration. And if we already organise our economic support programmes in such a way that only the most environmentally friendly production techniques receive public support, then we are giving a boost to a green economy that restores the environment.

### **The financial crisis is crying out for economic realism**

The blind pursuit of profit and deregulation has brought our financial markets to the edge of the abyss. It is time for new financial markets with better regulation and an auxiliary role with respect to the real economy and safety guarantees for our savings. The financial world must be radically reformed. Both the symptoms and the perverse system that lies behind it ("casino capitalism") must be dealt with.

In the past few decades, savings banks have devoted themselves more and more to speculative activities, which were becoming more and more detached from the economic reality and more and more risky. Now the system has completely collapsed and it is high time that the savings banks were strictly separated from risky merchant banking activities, and focused solely on their core business: managing savings and providing loans.

Individuals and SMEs must be able to borrow money, for example to invest in renovation work. All activities must be recorded in a transparent way in the balance sheet. The financial markets exceed the national level and this is why there is a need for more European regulation, an extension of the role of the European Central Bank, a European supervisor and an independent European ratings agency. The Belgian Banking, Finance and Insurance Commission (CBFA) must also have more authority and responsibilities. Banks must be obliged to hold safer assets and more own funds in order to reduce the risk. Sustainable investments are the future and the existing proliferation of financial products must be restricted.

The wages and severance pay of top managers must be reduced to a realistic level. Compensation and bonuses must suppress rather than encourage risk-taking and short-term thinking. Groen! advocates a government bank that manages and lends savings for the common good and the changeover to a green economy. Groen! is thus advocating a green bank.

## **Healthy and fair food**

We want healthy, safe and fair food to become the norm for everyone. Food must be tasty and healthy and be produced in a way that does not burden the environment, ensures a fair price for the farmer and respects the rights of people in developing countries.

In socioecologically sustainable agriculture, farmers receive a fair price for their efforts to produce healthy food in an environmentally friendly manner. This type of agriculture will focus much less on industrial production methods than current forms of agriculture. It will play an active role in preserving the environment and nature and will also guarantee animal rights. These principles must be found in a reformed European agricultural policy, which fully embraces socioecological sustainability and international justice.

## **Better protection for consumers**

Europe can do much more to provide better protection for consumers, and above all to give even more support to sustainable consumption. Consumers have the right to healthy and natural foodstuffs, and must always have access to complete information about the means of production and the ecological quality of products.

## **Financing the Green New Deal intelligently**

The proposed investments in the green sectors of the future cost money. Groen! wants to finance the Green New Deal by redistributing the existing unsustainable government budgets on the one hand, and through moderate debt financing on the other. If we bring the existing uneconomical concrete projects to a standstill, if we tax the windfall profits of the energy monopoly Electrabel and if we put a stop to the subsidisation of nuclear energy... we can create a large budgetary scope for real green investments. To a limited extent it is also possible to incur debt to finance the ecological conversion of our economy. After all, these investments will create extra jobs in the medium-term, new economic activity, new possibilities for exports and they will also pay for themselves. It is not crucial to spend more money, but it is crucial that the existing government budget is invested intelligently. A green economy means thinking in the long-term.

## ***2 A better quality of life***

### **More time and space for yourself, your partner, your children, your neighbours...**

Groen! is in favour of a fundamentally different way of looking at the relationship between working and earning money. We want to give people the chance to partially step out of the everyday rat race.

In the society that we want to work towards, not everything is for sale. Unpaid work such as caring for sick family members or voluntary work must also have a valuable place. This can be done by freeing up time and money. Groen! wants to give everyone the chance to work a 32 hours' week whilst retaining their social rights. The loss of wage is counterbalanced by a basic wage. The basic wage is a fixed amount. Those who earn little maintain their income thanks to this basic wage, while those who earn a lot work less and also earn a little less. Single parents who are currently obliged to work full-time thus have the opportunity to work less and still maintain a sufficient income.

### **Give people the chance to take their lives into their own hands**

Groen! supports a policy that starts from what someone can do instead of what they can't do anymore. Groen! wants to prevent "unwell-being" and advocates made-to-measure care and assistance.

Disabled people have the choice between living independently with the help of an assistant or living in a facility. This is also thanks to Groen! because we introduced the personal assistance budget in the government. Now we want to go one step further and provide personal financing. For us the disabled person himself or herself is the manager of his or her care. He or she determines what care and support is needed in order to have a good quality of life and pays for it with their personal budget.

Old is not out! Getting older is not an illness, on the contrary: many older people are very active. Through their experience they can live a richer life. For that matter, there is no one type of older person. There is great diversity within the group of what we call older people. There is a world of difference between a sixty years old and an eighty years old, which can be compared to the difference between the living environments of parents and their children. In the green society, the talents of people who no longer work will be amply brought into action and appreciated. Older people who need help will receive this help in their own surroundings as far as possible.

Groen! also wants a solution for the growing number of young people with problems. These young people are like the canary in the coalmine, the first to sense that mine gas is being released and thus that there is a threat of danger. These young people are showing us that there is something profoundly wrong with our way of life. Society must be attentive and react to the problem signs. The long waiting lists in special youth care cannot be justified. Youth services can offer the right help.

But providing more youth psychiatrists and more places in special youth care is not enough. We want to tackle these problems at their roots. The place of children and young people in our society must be completely re-thought. Our children and young people need more room and more time. Literally and metaphorically.

### **Opting for a socially-minded Europe**

Until now, European Member States have focused too little on developing the social aspect of the EU. Not only money and market, but also people and the environment must be integrated. The fact that some Member States systematically hinder social progress in the EU cannot continue. The crisis of the past few months made it crystal clear that there is a need for much better social protection at a level that is higher than the Member States, in other words at European level. The European Greens also want a comprehensive social pact for Europe, which will improve the working and living conditions of people in the EU. Social goals must be binding. Negative social and fiscal competition must be discouraged, and there must be a clear ambition to drive away poverty, via clear objectives. Member States that want to work together towards a deeper socioeconomic integration leading to a strengthening of social rights and the prevention of competition between Member States should be able to do so.

### **The unhurried school day**

Groen! is putting forward the idea of the unhurried primary school. This is a school where not only do our best pupils excel in maths and science, but where *all* children can do well in maths and science in an environment that ensures their well-being.

The current activation and performance oriented thinking means that our children have to live at the same rhythm as their parents. Always in a hurry, after school we run back and forth with our children in order to turn them into super humans who must still develop their sporting and creative talents after school. In an unhurried school we can escape the 'sub-divided' time in which children live today. Before and after school child care, school time which is limited in time and filled with the transfer of knowledge and extracurricular activities where creative and sporting talents must, out of sheer necessity, be developed after school.

In our school system there is no fault line between learning, waiting for parents and after-school activities. After-school activities and child care are brought to the child rather than the other way round. Children can (but don't have to!) go to school from 8 in the morning until 6 in the evening. Maths classes are alternated with optional activities such as music, drawing and theatre, and ample breaks are built in for play. Moreover, sports are practiced across individual classes, just like in a sports club. In this way children can already develop their talents at school and all aspects of the child's development are central.

With an unhurried school day, education becomes much more than just an economic finality (learning for a good job when they are older). Our children's childhood must become unhurried time once more. Play and creativity must have an essential role in the life of a child once more. Developing all the talents of all children at the child's rhythm, this is the green goal for the Flemish educational policy.

Groen! also wants to invest in multilingual education. Multilingualism is an important asset everywhere, but it is especially important in Brussels.

### **Better and more affordable homes**

The price-quality relationship in the housing market is out of balance. In the past few years the price of renting or buying a home has shot up dramatically. Almost a quarter of families in Flanders are struggling with housing costs that are very high or even too high. Good quality homes must be affordable for everyone. Groen! advocates more social housing and affordable homes in the private market, by introducing a maximum bill for rent and rent support.

Flanders has 300 000 homes with serious to very serious deficiencies. One in ten people in Flanders is living badly. The Flemish government wants to solve this problem by dividing up the land more and more. The slogan is: everyone can have their own house. More and more green around cities is disappearing to make way for rows of single-family dwellings and dreary, anonymous dormitory suburbs. The real social and ecological needs are being misunderstood here. Many people will never have the means to buy their own home. Many homes are not adapted to residents. Too many older people are on the waiting list for a serviced flat or retirement home and in the meantime, out of sheer necessity they live in terraced housing or detached houses which are far too big and badly insulated.

Groen! wants to approach the issue differently: we want to invest in ecological homes and residential areas which strengthen the social fabric rather than breaking it up. We want to reuse as many existing spaces as possible rather than cutting into new green spaces. By 2020 Groen! wants to have at least 70 000 new social homes. The Flemish government is only planning for 43 000. We want to place the emphasis on small-scale projects, sufficiently varied and intelligently situated in existing residential areas. In Brussels, where the need for good quality affordable homes is even greater, we want to increase the share of public housing to 20% in each municipality within 20 years. On top of this, Flanders and Brussels need a sharp increase in the number of service flats and homes for the elderly.

For Groen!, new residential areas will be social eco residential areas: low-traffic neighbourhoods with low-energy homes which need little or no energy, residential areas within the city which still have enough green and open spaces, where different generations can live together in harmony. In these areas our children can of course play in the street safely again. The houses are built in a circle so that a social web is encouraged.

Through fair prices for rent, Groen! wants rents to be determined according to the quality of the housing, the geographical location and the surroundings. At the same time, Groen! wants genuine rent support for those with lower incomes.

### **Investing in the wealth of culture**

We want to opt for quality and diversity. The government must continue to invest in culture even in times of economic crisis. Culture is not a washing powder. We believe that the cultural offer must not become boring and uniform but must be rich and varied in all respects. We want the government to continue setting aside sufficient means and investing in content modernisation. Television, radio and the Internet are particularly influential media for our children and young people today. We also want the next minister for Culture to also be the minister for Media. Viewing figures and marketeers should not determine the programming for public service channels. With the unhurried school we want to give all children the same access to culture. Culture via schools is fundamentally democratic, children from all backgrounds attend performances, get to know the local library, the museum... We want attention to be paid to all generations, including the elderly, and to the participation of people with a disability. Finally, a number of smaller commercial actors also opt for quality and for productions which are outside the mainstream. We must protect them.

We support culture at grassroots level, culture which is stimulating. We must set aside enough room for small initiatives. We want to start from what is already alive in neighbourhoods, from what is bubbling up from beneath, from existing initiatives and regular operations. Small music groups that are just starting out, small foreign productions, amateur theatre, libraries... They often have the power to reach young and old, Belgians

and foreign nationals, hugely diverse groups of people. We also want to stand up for youth culture. At the same time we want to make further investments in a stimulating framework in which young artists can work. Groen! wants to work on a network, a web that ensures cross-pollination between amateur arts and the professional sector, between education, libraries and cultural associations. The best way to do this is at local level.

And finally, we support a sustainable cultural policy. There are more and more (large) events. Often these initiatives have the merit of reaching a very wide audience, including children. This is a good thing. But they can also be a threat to the regular operations of cultural centres and to attention for smaller, local initiatives. We advocate a balance between daily operations and the exceptional, and between small-scale activities and events. We also want a 'green art centres plan'. This means that the government enters into a pact with the cultural sector to reduce the overall CO<sub>2</sub> emissions of cultural centres by 60% by 2025. The government invests in climate friendly cultural centres, theatres, art centres, museums and training institutions, which drastically reduce their CO<sub>2</sub> emissions via energy and transport plans. In addition, a sustainable policy is a less transient policy. The culture and media sector desperately need time to follow-up, implement and evaluate decrees. This means that a better balance will be found between regular operations and thematic work. This also means a genuinely cautious and sustainable association for our non-moveable heritage.

### *3 A society where everyone counts*

#### **Not only 'hardworking Flemings' have the right to a job tax rebate**

The Flemish government gives all workers in Flanders a job tax rebate of € 250 or € 300. But more than 1.2 million people in Flanders, including pensioners, the unemployed, workers who have been laid off, people who are ill, people with a disability, people taking a career break, women on maternity leave and Flemings living in Brussels do not receive this bonus. Groen! wants to guarantee purchasing power for all and thus for the people who need it most too.

#### **Working on green jobs, on a human scale**

In the past months unemployment has risen sharply. Month after month, the extent of the financial and economic crisis has become clearer, as has the impact in many families. Temporary unemployment still camouflages some of the actual extent of the crisis and of the unemployment figures. Never before have so many people felt uncertain about their job or about their future. At the same time, in many families the pressure of work is weighing down on their quality of life. Both quality of work and quality of life are under pressure.

The Flemish government has put everything into an extensive activation policy. Today the limits of this approach are painfully clear. The financial and economic crisis undid the efforts of the previous years in one blow. Moreover, the 'inclusive' approach of the VDAB (Flemish Department of Employment Agency) risks becoming an 'exclusive approach' for vulnerable groups.

Groen! wants a radically different job market policy. We want sustainable work, now more than ever. Ecologically sustainable, because global warming means that the changeover to a green economy is particularly urgent. Socially sustainable, with a redistribution of work, a good balance between work and family, and more attention paid to the quality of work. And with a strengthening of the social economy. If we continue along these lines throughout Europe, we can turn this crisis around and change it into a positive development for the benefit of people and the environment. If we don't do this, one crisis will continue to follow another.

#### **Poverty in 'wealthy' Flanders is unacceptable**

Flanders is one of the wealthiest regions in the world. And yet poverty visibly increased in the last term. In wealthy Flanders, inequality is growing. There is a need for a strong social policy that does more than just manage poverty. Groen! supports an inclusive society with a stronger poverty policy.

More and more people have to resort to food banks, more people have problems with their energy bills, more and more people are on the waiting list for help with debt problems and the number of unemployed has risen sharply in the past year. Groen! thus insists on a stronger well-being policy, but also on more attention for social choices in policy areas such as the economy, employment, housing and education in consultation with those concerned.

Groen! wants to raise all incomes over the European poverty line and make them index-related. In the meantime, the Flemish government must stimulate the OCMWs (Social Service Departments) to step in and help people living under the European poverty line with additional financial support. Better guidance during and after collective debt settlement can remedy a lot of distress. Usurious interest rates for overdraft facilities must be curbed.

With a maximum bill for rent, living is made affordable once more and thanks to the radical choice to invest in low-energy housing we will push down energy bills. With the unhurried school we want to give all the talents of all children a chance. In addition, we want to invest heavily in preventative health care so that the underprivileged also make more use of programmes such as breast cancer screening.

### **Diversity is a strength, not a problem**

Our country is becoming more and more diverse, certainly in the cities. Sadly this growing ethnic diversity is still experiencing many problems. Inequality is growing. There is more poverty and unemployment among people from other ethnic backgrounds, more falling behind in school and worse housing. We are confronted with racism but also with community problems. Groen! wants to fight every form of discrimination.

We believe that full citizenship is the basis of a successful, multicultural society. Full citizenship is open to anyone who lives here, regardless of background, sex, religion, social background... It is a set of equal rights and responsibilities from a socioeconomic, political and cultural point of view. Emancipation and better coexistence is a two-way process. Exclusion such as language criteria for basic social facilities, insults (just think of islamophobia) or a wagging finger leads to misplaced effects and reciprocal polarisation. For Groen! dialogue is crucial. Foreign communities also have a role to play when it comes to internal debate and taking positive initiatives. All adult individuals must bear their own responsibility. If this responsibility is not accepted, emancipation cannot succeed.

Groen! is urgently asking for clarity for people without papers. The government cannot continue procrastinating. Those who have stayed in our country for years and made their lives here can claim the right to regularisation. We advocate an objective assessment of criteria.

Better regulation in our country cannot be separated from a more comprehensive European approach. We advocate a fair European asylum and migration policy that guarantees the rights of migrants and asylum seekers and is no longer dependent on bidding between Member States.

### **The knowledge society is for everyone**

At a European level there is strong dedication to the development of the knowledge society, and this is a good thing. We believe it is very important that in support for research and development, even more attention is paid to sustainable innovation. And we also believe that everyone must be able to enjoy the advantages of the knowledge society. All population groups must be given a chance in programmes for lifelong learning and students must be able to study all around Europe even more easily. We are also asking for a European charter for digital rights, offering, among other things, solid guarantees for privacy, freedom of information, freedom of speech, software interoperability, safe online shopping and universal access to broadband Internet and education in digital skills.

### **Set European integration back on track, stop Barroso!**

The crisis of the past few months made it clear to everyone: we don't need less but rather more Europe, and a better Europe at that. And this is exactly what the European Greens have been saying for years. In order to deal with the challenges of the 21<sup>st</sup> century effectively, we absolutely need a strong Europe that fully embraces

ecological sustainability and social and international justice. The current EU has not even begun to meet this objective sufficiently. In the past few years chances were still regularly missed or completely wrong choices were made. For the Greens it is thus unacceptable that a number of Member States and political groups in the European Parliament now also want to conclude an agreement for the European Commission president Barroso, who in many respects is the symbol of wrong choices, to be confirmed as the new president of the Commission even before European citizens can express their opinion. The best alternative to a European policy that continues to run on an outdated path is a strong green delegation in the European Parliament. This is the only way we can guarantee that the EU will finally opt for a sustainable and liveable future.

### **The EU as a world actor for international ecological justice**

Although the EU is a very important economic power, it is still much too little of a political power, which in a changing world radically embraces a different globalisation. The European Greens are convinced that the EU must urgently play this role, and must take action to promote fair trade globally so that it becomes the norm, a fair climate agreement between industrialised and developing countries, the right to food for all, dignified work, reaching the Millennium goals, preventative justice rather than preventative war, a nuclear-free world and sustainable links with close neighbours to the east and south of Europe.

### **Why, now more than ever, is a green vote a useful vote?**

Everyone seems to have gone green now, so why should we still vote for Groen!? Almost all the parties are indeed doing their best to present themselves as being 'green'. We are happy to see more and more people taking on green ideas, the more the better. It shows how much of an important role the green parties have already played, thus showing how necessary they were.

But what else is striking? Other parties are now gradually advocating, for example, that opting to green our economy is a very intelligent choice. And this is exactly what the green parties have been saying for years, but what these other parties fought against tooth and nail. The bitter reality of the fact that ecological choices were put to one side for years is that now the misery is greater for many people. To take one example, large car factories which refused to adopt green cars for many years are now the worst hit by the crisis and many thousands of people are losing their jobs. The same companies still continue lobbying to shift stricter environmental regulations, and on top of that they are still asking for government support to make their cars greener. Right now, more people are convinced that we really must opt for socioecological change in order to safeguard the quality of life and safety of the current generations, and the chances in life for the next generations, right now it is vitally important that the green parties *are* listened to and thus have a strong presence in the parliaments.

But it is also striking that the sudden green conversion of the other parties is not especially believable. On the one hand, whether it is relevant or not, they describe everything as 'sustainable', but on the other these politicians unfailingly support the construction of large new concrete projects, and they take on board few or no ecological principles in the large-scale recovery plans that are now being launched. Now is the time to use the crisis in order to change direction, and not to try solving the challenges of the future with the tools of the past again. Right now there is need for strong green parties who together can ensure that others can no longer hide behind superficially 'green' policies which only serve to conceal the fact that they just want to continue on the same path.

In almost all countries in the EU, green parties are active; we are in councils, parliaments and in some places also in governments. Green ideas are too important not to be implemented. This is why, together, we want to take on our responsibility to actively put our proposals into practice.

Within the European Green Party, these green politicians are already working closely together on a coherent vision and programme. They support and strengthen each other. As Greens we always have a cross-border view, so cooperation like this is natural for us. But this also has great added value. We share ideas and smaller and larger green parties can thus act decisively together. So a green vote also means a double return.

A strong green delegation in the Flemish, Brussels and European Parliament will be a good watchdog now that crucial choices need to be made. And if we are strong enough, together we can already take on the responsibility to implement our green ideas. Because if one thing is clear when you look at the current Flemish government, it is that it is definitely not a green leadership. These politicians in government who say they are standing up for socioecological choices either don't do so when it boils down to it, or are not strong enough. Only a stronger Groen! can act to change this.

As we have already said, a vote for Groen! is, on balance, also a vote for the European Greens, who bring colour to the political landscape in every respect. And they do so with a strong and optimistic complete vision. This is resumed in brief in the slogan of the European Greens: Think Big, Vote Green. Now is the time!

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