

This is an extract from an interview conducted by Belgian journalist Douglas de Coninck earlier this year [2015]. We are grateful to Douglas for allowing us to use it in Trust News.

"Yes, the poverty numbers are going through the roof, but that is the fault of the people who haven't understood what I have just explained to you." An afternoon in the company of Roland Duchâtelet [68] who feels that Thomas Piketty simply doesn't get it. "Free money for everyone: that really is the solution."

ROLAND RECEIVES us in an executive box at Standard Liege. Outside, you can smell the grass. The 2011 Belgian Cup sits in a niche. Everything around us breathes football, but Roland imposes one condition: he does not want to talk about football. Nor the reason why not, "This is much more important," he says,

He emailed in advance that he sees something of himself in Alan Turing, the scientist who cracked the Nazi's Enigma code and thus, in the view of many historians, decided the war in favour of the Allies.

During his life (1912-1954) Turing was not a popular figure, according to the film *The Imitation Game*. He was not empathetic and did everything with a shockingly bad sense of timing. I am reminded of Duchâtelet provoking concern among the supporters of his clubs with bizarre changes of coach. Whether Standard are winning or losing, the chant of 'anti-Duchâtelet ole, ole' rings out around the stadium. However, that is exactly what he does not want to talk about.

Alan Turing, chemically castrated in 1952 because of homosexuality, only received recognition fifty years after his death. Duchâtelet, in his email, "Do you think that kept Alan Turing awake at night?"

You think not?

Roland Duchâtelet: "Like many people, I know that our solar system will no longer exist in five billion years. It is also conceivable that a few people in the meantime now and then will escape. I believe therefore that Turing was a very intelligent man, and that he realised that. He didn't lie awake at night, worrying about being famous. That is totally not important. If someone thinks I'm a fat idiot, I'm sorry for him, but that's not important to me."

We can't talk about football, so what can we talk about?

"About Thomas Piketty. His supporters go on about justice all the time. They find it unfair that capital delivers much more than labour.

"Let me tell you something: in the economy, there is no place for justice. (He laughs). It is a simple question: does it work or not? By the by, someone who is politically appointed and doesn't lift a finger all his life, is that fair? Wages for work is a myth."

"Piketty is someone who tries to analyse what happened in the past and then grabs on to that to predict the future. Of course, that is very dangerous and often turns out wrong. It doesn't take account of the explosion in the world's population, nor of the drying up of the oil supply. The concept of capital, just like labour, is only a bit more than two centuries old. Capital is a recent phenomenon, just like paid labour. Before that you had slaves and serfs. Unions have only existed for 150 years. Now machines have replaced humans and animals."

"What I'm saying can be mathematically proven. In 1850, agriculture still represented 70% of employment, today it is 1%. Now only 8% of the population work in all of the productive sectors

put together - agriculture, industry and construction. In the meantime, productivity has increased considerably: we are making much more with fewer people. The organisation of society as we now know it will have only very briefly existed in the history of mankind."

"As far as I'm concerned, capital is also not particularly relevant anymore, It's something that came into existence in the 19th century, Capital helps our income to shift in time, but that's really quite artificial when you think about it."

"The problem With Piketty is that he doesn't look beyond his own analysis. He doesn't seem to understand that we are going through the two biggest revolutions in the history of mankind right now. After the replacement of physical labour through steam then electric machines, we are now seeing the replacement of mental labour through computers. There is absolutely no need for people to work anymore in order to enjoy life to the full."

"Alongside this we have another revolution which is much greater than the invention of the printing press or the discovery of the wheel: the internet. People can now freely exchange information worldwide. Thirty years ago that was completely unthinkable. The problem is no-one realises it."

Sorry, what do we not realise?

"That today we are in the middle of an unbelievably drastic revolution in the history of mankind. But people like Piketty, and others in our government, simply do not see it."

Only you can see what others can't?

"Me and a few other people. Few people see things clearly. Many people think tomorrow Will be just like yesterday. It's normal that they think like that, but in practice it is not like that. I belong to the small group of people who think tomorrow will be different from today."

In the shadow of stand four, red lamps irradiate the grass with an angelic patience. It was not Roland's idea, "They think they will help the grass to grow better," he says, strolling past. It's obvious that he doesn't believe it. Duchatelet is a proponent of artificial pitches. It was one of the controversial ideas with which he got the whole football world up in arms. But, he says, "We were not going to talk about football."

Shame. Many people have questions about what you were up to with all those clubs

(Unperturbed) "If in any case you want to take the philosophical tour, then I'll say: let's see the achievements of mankind as a collective capital, a social dividend. The interest on something which we have brought about together during the past few hundred years. Our society is therefore rich enough and in a state to take care that no-one should live in poverty. Robots and computers now work in our place."

The poverty numbers are going through the roof

"Yes, they are going through the roof, but that is the fault of the people who have not understood what I have just explained to you."

20 years ago with your minority Vivant party you were striving for the introduction of a guaranteed basic income. In 2016, the Swiss are voting on it in a referendum Were you right after all?

"What has the problem been up till now with a basic income? On the right, many people think it can't happen, that people who do nothing still get money. You can't get this across to most of the West Flemish. On the left the problem is that a basic income takes the power away from the unions and the socialists. They can no longer say to people, 'Vote for us, because otherwise you'll get nothing.' That's why everyone in politics is against the basic income."

"If you reflect on Piketty's success, who says that everything is unfair, then I say: introduce the social dividend. Our parents and grandparents have built this society. With motorways, railways, waterways and automation. Let's translate that into a dividend for everyone. I no longer talk about free money, but about social dividend, Piketty's term for the basic income. Everyone should get money, because that is the best for our economy".

Philosopher Philippe van Parijs. who also lobbies for free money, once said that you need a coalition of three types of people to bring about change: daredevils. visionaries and opportunists. Which are you?

"I'm a visionary, of course. Because I'm an engineer. I try to reflect on how the world might look tomorrow"

In advance Duchatelet emailed a file with a carefully calculated answer to the question of how free money would work in practice. 170 euro per child. On turning 18, you get 500 euro, after which the amount increases to 800 euro for 61 year olds and 1,200 euro for 68 year olds. Alongside this, every Belgian receives in kind the right to 300 euro per month for education and medical care, through which he/she can choose schools and hospitals in a privatised environment. The whole thing, it states, is easy to bring into effect: 'The solution: cut 12 billion euro three times over.'

And that is done. we read, by abolishing all subsidies, a tax shift and making civil servants redundant. Abolish all subsidies?

"In Belgium we give out 12 billion per year in subsidies. To institutions and establishments, whilst everyone knows that it serves no purpose."

Even culture serves no purpose?

"At the moment a theatre company has to go and beg for money from a minister. Then it pays the artist net and goodness knows how much in tax. If you explain the situation to the artist, then he/she will chose the individual subsidy of the basic income

"When we set up Vivant 20 years ago, we had a big following in the cultural world. They felt that the basic income delivered them from the constraint of specialists who decided over their heads whether their art was good or bad"

Your next 12 billion comes from a tax shift.

"Yes, income tax - and also social security - would be further reduced and replaced by an increase in VAT, excise and a property tax, in the shape of a higher tax on financial transactions. In this way you can abolish up to 1,500 euro per month income tax. Which means, for people in this category, especially those of a lower education level, there is no longer any difference between declared and undeclared work. Precisely within this vulnerable group, more people Will go out to work."

You will achieve your third 12 billion by mass redundancies among civil servants

"By doing nothing more than bringing civil service employment back to the level of 15 years ago. Since 2000 we have compensated for the loss in employment opportunities by directly or indirectly taking people on in the public sector, and the number has grown by 15%. It's a consequence of mismanagement by the Flemish government above all.

Local authorities especially have recruited so many people. Paid for through taxes Why did Ford Genk close? Because the authorities have recruited too many bureaucrats. Simple. We must dare to call a spade a spade."

As years go by you seem to become more hostile towards politicians

"I am not hostile. I try to analyse rationally. I am the inventor of the tax shift, 20 years ago. It's unfair to say that my ideas don't hit the mark. In Germany, they introduced the tax shift in 2005, in Belgium, we are just 20 years too late.

"Above all, political parties are self-interested. We have a big problem: 95% of existing legislation was envisaged and introduced in an era without the internet and our politicians do not seem to be at all motivated to change anything about that. Why are politicians not concerned about the future? Because their electors live in the past. They can't put out messages to the world in the way that I do. If they were to do that, they'd lace conflict."

The only way to mean something in politics, is to peddle rubbish?

"Curry favour with people, and then you get votes: that's how it works. Politicians read the paper in the morning, then spend the rest of the day trying to think up ways to appear in the next day's paper."

"60 years ago Belgium was a closed economy, everything was made here. Telephones, radiators, everything. Today the economy is completely open. What you are now getting is competition between countries. Engineers, artists and other sensible people will move to countries that are more interesting, where they can lead a better life. Then there are two possibilities. Either the Belgian authorities adapt and try to keep these people here, or they don't, and they are gone."

Roland Duchatelet, through his technology company Melexis, worked his way up from nothing to become one of the top 20 richest Belgians. When Standard Liege were for sale in 2011, he put 41 million euro on the table. He went on to buy Charlton Athletic in London, Ujpest in Hungary, Carl Zeiss Jena in Germany and Alcorcon in Spain. At each of these clubs the fans crave explanation of his bigger plan, of his vision.

Towards the end of our conversation, he lifts a corner of the veil after all. With a sigh. We are staring at the T2, the stand of the ultras: of the frightful fans: of the chants. Does that never bother him? He says: "Many of the guests who sit there are unemployed and have nothing else to do all day. They spend all their time on internet fora. Suddenly they know everything about Standard. They have nothing better to do the whole day long. I cannot compete with that."

With a policy of free money do we not risk becoming even more via global magnet for poor people?

"Your question suggests you are saying: actually you are right, but there are a few practical problems. Well, practical problems are there to be solved. You could tighten the immigration conditions to the level of other developed countries. Such as Canada, New Zealand, the United States. Then you're actually already there.

“It's also not the case that the introduction of a social dividend implies that people will no longer work, quite the contrary. There have already been a reasonable number of studies carried out about the basic income. There have been experiments in Canada and India and also in Belgium with 'Win for Life'. At Leuven University they have studied the behaviour of winners. They all carry on working. The big difference is that they do it with much more pleasure, they do what they want to do. The results are identical everywhere. People feel happier, richer and above all, more entrepreneurial”

Interview by Douglas de Coninck Translated by Heather McKinlay

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