

# Women of Europe

## single currency

### Editorial

### Round table on the Euro: the challenge of information

An event of double importance took place in January at the European Parliament. This was the Round Table on the single currency, known as the Euro since the Madrid Summit. It was organised at the initiative of the European Commission.

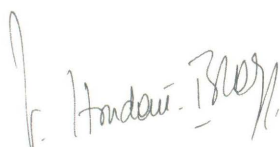
This event represents a significant step in the introduction of the European single currency and is also one of the widest consultations of citizens ever organised by the Commission to examine how to implement a policy which will affect them as individuals.

Until now, the single currency has left most people indifferent because they had little understanding of the issues. Now that it is becoming less abstract and more of a reality with the Euro, it is suddenly frightening some citizens and causing concern to many others.

This is why the introduction of the single currency, which will be at the heart of economic life, should be understood by public opinion and have its backing.

From the discussions held at the Round Table it emerged that it was crucial to carry out information campaigns adapted to the expectations of the different major user groups of the Euro, whether banks or companies, public administrations or consumers.

In the latter category, women were seen as a group to be given special attention because they make up half of the population, they are in the forefront because of their multiple roles in the private and public spheres and also because they risk remaining more reticent if the information provided does not answer their queries.



Véronique Houdart-Blazy

Head of Section - Information for Women

The single European currency, the Euro, scheduled to start in 1999 was at the centre of the most systematic consultation ever initiated by the European Commission to prepare an information campaign. Over 400 representatives of government, the economic and financial worlds and consumer and associative movements came for the three-day Round Table organised by the Commission on 22, 23, 24 January at the European Parliament. Information strategies were discussed in three workshops targeting consumers, enterprises and public administrations.

The message was clear. There was a need for information which was "complete, direct and simple". It had to address each of the different user groups of the future currency - banks, enterprises, public administrations and consumers - and "adapted to their separate needs" covering all aspects of private and public life. These needs will have to be identified in advance through "detailed consultations and surveys". The information had to be organised on a "permanent and professional basis" in a decentralised fashion.

Outlining women's preoccupations about the single currency at the Round Table, Ann Taylor, President of the *European Women's Lobby*, regretted that women have been largely excluded from the debate on EMU (European Monetary Union) and the convergence criteria required to achieve monetary union.

"This is largely due to the fact that they continue to be systematically excluded from decision-making positions," she said. "Unless serious efforts are made to redress this democratic deficit, even the best designed information campaigns will fail to garner the full support of women," she warned.

Ann Taylor called for "accurate and user-friendly information tailored to women's specific needs". In their multiple roles, women remain the principle consumers of goods, she said, warning that any "information campaign which omits mentioning potentially negative effects will foster scepticism."

Round Table participants recommended that the campaigns should provide "reassurance about the many concerns people have, in particular about the ability of the Euro to preserve the purchasing power of long term investments and pensions." The key messages must explain the reasons behind the introduction of the Euro and the advantages it will bring for daily life. "Citizens should not view their national currency as disappearing but rather see it evolving to the European level."

Participants also urged a major training and education effort for the young which included music, the decorative arts and information technologies (Internet, interactive programmes). Although enterprises were seen as "ultimately responsible for preparing themselves for the Euro," participants said that the training of private sector staff and especially those in finance was a "crucial aspect of the successful adaptation by enterprises to the Euro."

The public sector also needed preparation through training. The biggest challenge was for the retail sector where the dual display of prices was recommended as a "matter of good commercial practice" and to "overcome suspicion".

Education initiatives were also seen as vital in schools and universities. Round Table participants said that teaching materials on the Euro should be made available rapidly, if possible for the 1996-1997 school year.

Other practical measures to speed up the process of informing citizens included:

- setting up national steering committees in each Member State, notably, to draw up action plans for the various sectors concerned
- launching national information campaigns with Community support
- the provision of technical specifications on future notes and coins to give the Euro a concrete identity
- setting up a specialist group at Union level to ensure that Member States' communications strategies are consistent
- continuing the discussions initiated during the Round Table with the major user groups on a national, sectoral or Community basis
- launching measures tailored to specific user groups (consumer organisations, the elderly, the disabled) or specific economic groups (SMES) that may encounter particular difficulties as a result of the move to the single currency, with a view to identifying their individual needs and to devising appropriate information measures
- the supply of precise and comprehensible information progressively and in good



# council

## Italian Presidency Priorities: Consistency, continuity, cohesion

time on the technical arrangements of transition to the Euro based on the timetable agreed by European heads of state at the Madrid summit.

An exhibition entitled "Time Journey Through Monetary Europe" traced the history of money from Ancient Greek coins to electronic payment in the 21st century's information society. This exhibition presented the Euro as part of a natural process in the evolution of money in Europe. Ideally, it should be a travelling exhibition to be seen by all citizens, the final users of the single currency. ●

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Susanna Agnelli

Photo: European Parliament

Susanna Agnelli, Italian Foreign Minister and President of the European Council of Ministers, promised "consistency, continuity and cohesion" in Europe's action during the Italian presidency to end in June.

Speaking at the European Parliament in January, she said the Italian presidency wants to "impart a fresh momentum into European ideals" to attract greater public support. Employment "a first issue of vital importance", citizenship rights, the simplification of bureaucratic and administrative procedures and "those

problems of civil society and security which impinge most heavily on public opinion" would be tackled, she said.

The Presidency would be pressing on with the Union's growth, competitiveness and employment strategy. As part of this, it would be promoting equal opportunities policies in public and private sectors, taking particular account of the Beijing recommendations and the 4th equal opportunities action programme.

Special attention would also be paid to education and training and providing incentives for businesses investing in vocational training to improve employment opportunities.

With the Social Partners, she said the Italian Presidency wanted to improve education and vocational training, promote more flexible forms of working, develop fresh job opportunities and support weaker groups by combating unacceptable forms of social exclusion.

Other priorities were to get the Inter-governmental Conference up and running and to inject more democracy into the EU's decision-making processes and promote the concept of European citizenship.

Preparations for monetary union and enlargement were also an urgent priority. "We must resist the easy temptation to make the Maastricht criteria a scapegoat for some of the serious problems that many of our countries are facing," Ms Agnelli said. She believed that, once established, the single currency could be a powerful stimulus to the EU's economic development. ●

# commission

## Recommendation seeks to promote women in decision-making

The European Commission presented a draft Recommendation seeking to promote a balanced participation of women and men at all levels of decision-making to European Union Social Affairs ministers in December.

The requirement for women and men to share decision-making "represents a goal which is regarded as beneficial for society as a whole," it said. The "scarcity of women in circles where collective decisions are prepared or taken is identified as one of the causes of inequality between women and men and of societies' structural inflexibility," it added.

The Recommendation asks Member States to examine the balance between women and men in all spheres including government and to adopt strategies ranging from "mere encouragement to legislation" to redress current imbalances. It urged the public sector and elected bodies to appoint more women and set an example.

For posts involving recruitment by competition, it called for an equal number of

men and women involved in the selection process.

Changes were urged in school textbooks and in education and training so that "public responsibilities" are no longer seen as being reserved for men and "private responsibilities" for women but as "shared between the two." Member states should take measures to stop advertisers and the media "undermining equality" through "unjustified stereotypes."

The social partners, the private and public sectors, political parties and groups, associations and NGOs and the media are encouraged to develop equal opportunities plans and measures to ease women's access to decision-making.

Other strategies in the Recommendation include quantitative and qualitative studies on women's involvement in decision-making and the drawing up of EU-wide statistics illustrating how men and women are represented in all levels of decision-making in political, administrative, economic, social and cultural life.

The Commission's role was seen as one of providing information, alerting public opinion and promoting pilot activities, and encouraging and organising, jointly with Member States, a systematic pooling and exchange of experience and an assessment of national policies in this field. ●

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## Historic agreement reached on parental leave

European employers and trade unions (ETUC, UNICE, CEEP) made history in December when they signed a framework agreement granting both parents the right to take a minimum of three months' parental leave in addition to maternity leave.

This agreement is the first ever signed under the Maastricht Treaty's Social Protocol. It sets out the minimum requirements for parental leave and leave for reasons of "force majeure" for women and men in all Member States, except the UK and Northern Ireland, not party to the protocol.

European Commission President Jacques Santer and Social Affairs Commissioner Padraig Flynn welcomed the agreement in a joint statement saying it was "an important contribution to the promotion of real equality in the labour market between women and men, to encouraging the bet-

ter reconciliation of work and family life and to the development of the more flexible work patterns needed to help create new jobs".

A draft directive based on the agreement was proposed by the Commission on 31 January. This will be submitted to the Council of Ministers for approval. It gives Member States two years to implement the agreement through legislation or collective bargaining.

Employers and trade unions opted for a flexible approach to parental leave which may be taken on a full-time, part-time or piecemeal basis or in the form of time credit until the child's eighth birthday.

At the end of the leave period, the parent is guaranteed the right to return to her/his old job, or equivalent employment. Pension and social security entitlements

will be maintained during the absence from work.

Under the agreement, leave from work is also possible for urgent family reasons (illness, accident etc) where the presence of the employee is "indispensable".

COFACE, the Confederation of Family Organisations in the European Community, welcomed the agreement but said it had major shortcomings the most important being the question of pay for parents during the leave period. This is left entirely up to Member States. COFACE said "unless parents are granted a replacement benefit, many of them (especially single parents) will not be able to afford to lose three months' salary". ●

## Sakharov Prize to Former Kurdish MP

The European Parliament awarded the Sakharov Prize for freedom of expression, worth 15.000 ECU, to imprisoned Kurdish Parliamentarian Leyla Zana.

In 1991, she became the first Kurdish woman to be elected to the Turkish Parliament. Since March 1994, she has been jailed by the Turkish authorities for leading a non-violent struggle on behalf of the Kurdish people. The President of the European Parliament, Klaus Hänsch, paid tribute to her courage, energy, intelligence and self-sacrifice.

Receiving the award on behalf of his wife, Medhi Zana expressed his gratitude for the award and for the European Parliament's show of solidarity with the Kurdish people.

He gave special thanks to Danielle Mitterrand, widow of the late French President, who was present for the ceremony in the Visitors' Gallery, and to the MEPs who had nominated his wife for the prize. ●



Leyla Zana  
Photo: European Parliament

## Committee on Women's Rights

Addressing the European Parliament's Committee on Women's Rights on 19 and 20 December, Cristina Alberdi Alonso, President of the Spanish Social Affairs Council, said there was an urgent need to act on the decisions taken at the UN Conference in Beijing. Ms Alberdi said she was particularly concerned at the plight of women living under the threat of death, rape or other forms of violence.

Reviewing progress made on women's issues during Spain's six-month presidency, she said the newly adopted Fourth Equal Opportunities Action Programme will provide a reference framework for national action in the field and boost cooperation between Member States on equal opportunities. Despite the important reduction in the budget made by Social Affairs Ministers, Cristina Alberdi believed the programme's efficiency would not be reduced.

She also welcomed the social partners' parental leave agreement saying it was a step forward for equality.

During the meeting, the Committee on Women's Rights adopted the report by Maria Paola Colombo Svevo on equal pay for work of equal value. The report recommended a rewording of the Treaty's article 119 concerning equal pay to clearly cover work of equal value as part of the Intergovernmental Conference talks.

Member States were asked to introduce measures to reduce wage differences and to better address low-paid sectors in their

wage policies. To help close the wages gap, the social partners should include more women in collective bargaining, suggested the report, and organise information campaigns on the theme "equal pay for work of equal value" targeted at the women and men involved in wage negotiations. The parental leave agreement between the social partners should be rapidly adopted by the Council so that it can be incorporated into national legislation.

The Committee held a brief exchange of views on a report on equal treatment for women and men in social security schemes following the Barber judgement during which rapporteur Helena Torres Marques called for the harmonisation of retirement ages for women and men throughout the EU.

A report by Francesca Bennasar Tous on the development of a European multi-media content industry looked at the advantages and disadvantages of such a programme for women. Concerning amendments to the Directive safeguarding employees' rights in the event of transfers of undertakings, Sue Waddington said that the proposed changes would indirectly discriminate against women. ●

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