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ENVIRONMENT: "Sustainable development" - a message for Europe

The European Commission agrees with the guidelines of the Brundtland report.

The world's political and economic leaders must change their habits and practices and adopt the principle of sustainable development - that is to say, "progress which meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their needs".

This, in essence, is the message of a report entitled "Our Common Future". It was prepared by the World Commission on Environment and Development and presented in Brussels by its president, Mrs Gro Harlem Brundtland, prime minister of Norway.

The report, launched in London end April, is the outcome of 2½ years of work by personalities from 21 countries, most of them in the Third World, undertaken at the request of the United Nations. Its authors, with Mrs. Brundtland in the lead, have now undertaken to present their report around the world, beginning with Western Europe.

According to the authors of the report, the requirements of an economic development which is respectful of the environment interest not only the developing countries but also the developed. If Mrs Brundtland chose to begin her world tour in Brussels, it is because her Commission has received substantial support from the European Commission as well as various West European countries. But as Mrs Brundtland pointed out herself, it "is also appropriate that we present our report here in Brussels in the context of the European Year of the Environment, which reiterates that the Community is now an important player in the world's environmental policy".

Even before Mrs Brundtland's visit to the European Commission and the EC Council of Ministers, the European Environment Commissioner, Stanley Clinton Davis, had found the report totally convincing and of direct interest to the Community and its various policies.

This is because the report's recommendations deal with agriculture as well as energy, and industry as well as aid to developing countries. The Brundtland Commission envisages "a new era of growth", less energy-intensive, more equitable and more respectful of natural resources.

The report criticizes numerous aspects of the policies pursued by the developed countries: agricultural subsidies, inadequacies as regards nuclear safety and the terms on which trade with developing countries is conducted. But the authors insist that sustainable development is within reach.

CONSUMERS: Rights are not enough in themselves

The European Commission is looking into the possibility of setting up a "Community agency" to make it easier for consumers to enforce their rights.

European Community consumers enjoy greater rights and better protection today than only a few years ago. But very often these gains are partly offset by difficulties in securing redress. The game is not always worth the candle, as the cost of seeking legal advice is very high and the whole procedure for obtaining redress very slow. The tendency therefore is to grumble and let it go at that - which obviously doesn't incite suppliers of goods and services to try harder.

Hence the European Parliament's request to the European Commission that it look into the possibility of setting up a "Community agency to facilitate information exchanges, so as to allow individuals and small businesses to seek damages", even when the sums involved are relatively small, and to take the matter to court.

The Commission will shortly ask for a feasibility study, even though the idea of a Community agency may seem somewhat ambitious at this stage. On the basis of this study the Commission could try to encourage the various bodies which already exist to cooperate among themselves, a move which would facilitate appeals to the courts. The active cooperation of the Community's member states clearly is crucial, especially if consumer organizations in one country are to be allowed to handle cases whose origins lie in another.

The Commission will also examine the possibility of drafting a framework directive giving consumer associations the right to go to court in defense of their collective interests. In order to stimulate discussion in the EC Council of Ministers the Commission has just sent it a fresh memorandum on the subject, together with a detailed account of its own activities in this field.

CHILDREN: The home as a source of accidents

The European Commission launches an information campaign to make homes more secure for children.

Some 20,000 infants and adolescents under 18 years of age are killed each year, another 30,000 maimed for life and 20 million injured in the European Community. They are the victims not of some terrible war but of accidents, both in the home and during leisure-time activities. Such accidents are not only a source of pain and grief but also extremely costly for society as a whole: ECU 15 billion* disappear each year in medical, including hospital, expenses.

The European Commission wants to reduce the number of injuries and deaths by 10 to 20% by 1992, with the help of an information campaign to be launched this October. Its primary targets will be parents of infants (from 0 to 4 years of age); adolescents who look after children, whether at home or for others (as babysitters, employees in vacation camps, etc.) and teachers in schools and kindergartens.

The campaign will focus initially on the four main types of accidents to children - poisoning, burns, falls and drowning - in which behaviour plays an important part.

Homes, schools and playgrounds often contain hazards which can be removed. Children are the future of Europe and its key asset, especially today when birth rates are falling practically everywhere. Protecting them is as important as fighting cancer or pollution.

* 1 ECU = UK£ 0.70 or IR£ 0.78.

CONSUMERS: The war against dangerous goods

The Commission's proposed new directive is a major step in consumer protection policy.

The European Commission seems more determined than ever before to protect consumers. For the third time in 24 hours it has agreed to a memorandum on the subject and announced that work on a directive is to begin at once.

Some 45 million accidents each year in the European Community, 50,000 to 80,000 of which are fatal, represent an unacceptable price in the eyes of the European Commission, as they are largely due to products in daily use, either because they are unsafe or have been incorrectly used by consumers, who can be clumsy on occasion.

The member states as a whole are conscious of the seriousness of the problem. Four of them have already adopted legislation dealing with consumer safety generally, while six others are in the process of doing so. The European Commission wants, however, to prevent differences between national laws acting as non-tariff barriers to the free movement of goods and otherwise distorting competition, thus endangering the completion of the single market by 1992.

To this end the Commission has begun work on a general directive capable of harmonizing the legislation which already exists or is envisaged by the member states.

The directive will go to the Council of Ministers this autumn. It will generally require manufacturers, importers and distributors to put on sale only those goods which are safe, and place manufacturers and shopkeepers under the obligation to keep a watch on the market and inform customers.

The directive will also require the authorities to act in the case of goods whose use presents grave and immediate risks. To this end the directive will authorize intervention, temporary or definitive, at the national level, as regards the sale of unsafe consumer goods. At the same time it will complete the product liability directive, which provides for compensation even when the manufacturer is not at fault. The new directive, in other words, will be preventive in its approach and aim at improving the safety level of consumer goods.

FISHERIES: Community money to prevent over-fishing

The Twelve agree to extend financial assistance for national control measures.

The control of fishing in the territorial waters of the 12-nation European Community, essential to the conservation of certain species, will benefit from the modernization of the necessary facilities, thanks to the EC's financial assistance. The fisheries ministers of the Twelve agreed in early May that the Community would bear 50% of the eligible expenditure of the member states, for a total of ECU 10m.*

Since the birth in January 1983 of the Community's fisheries policy, Community fishermen have not always respected the restrictions on the size of catches. Last December the EC Council of Ministers adopted a regulation aimed at strengthening control measures, which are the responsibility of the national authorities in the main.

Thanks to a recent agreement among the Twelve, which will shortly take the form of a Community regulation, the member states will be able to equip their surveillance vessels with electronic equipment for recording catch data and its onward transmission.

The Council also agreed to extend special financial assistance to Portugal, to allow it to modernize the ships and aircrafts used for surveillance purposes.

* 1 ECU = UK£ 0.70 or IR£ 0.78.

MOTORING: Are cars with left-hand drive more accident-prone in Ireland?

The higher insurance premiums they incur are not "anti-European" however.

Insurance companies in Ireland and the U.K. are not forbidden under Community law to charge a supplement in the case of cars with left-hand drive, the European Commission recently told the Irish Euro-MP, Mary Banotti.

According to the Commission, not all Irish and British insurers impose a loading, which is usually in the range of 20 to 25% of the normal insurance premium. They justify it on the grounds that conductors of left-hand drive cars have reduced visibility when driving on the left.

The Commission was unaware, however, whether insurance companies on the Continent imposed a similar loading in the case of vehicles with right-hand drive. In any case, it was not banned under Community law.

THE MEDIA: Covering the EC requires special training - or does it?

Why not a European school of journalism?

A good journalist can write and talk at length on subjects he knows nothing about. This uncharitable definition, although attributed to the journalists themselves, does not seem to have convinced a Spanish Euro-MP, Manuel Cantarero del Castillo.

What he would like is a training centre, dispensing the "solid basic training" your professional newshound requires, in Mr del Castillo's view, if he is to cover events in the European Community intelligently. The fact is that given the upsurge in Community activities, journalists covering it need a thorough grounding in Community affairs, plus refresher courses.

The European Commission shares this view, as the information commissioner, Carlo Ripa di Meana, told the Euro-MP. Hence its support for developing basic training in such a way as to ensure that journalists are more familiar with Community activities.

As regards television, the Commission is working on a number of pilot projects to develop regular programmes of exchange for young journalists working in different European broadcasting stations. The Commission also envisages seminars for editors and those responsible for specialized information.

These proposals should allow participants to improve their knowledge of Community affairs and the functioning of Community institutions as well as of working methods in other countries, the Commission believes.

GASTRONOMY: Gastronomes of Europe, unite!

The Gourmet Clubs are the outposts of European haute cuisine.

"The art of cooking is the oldest of the arts", declared Brillat-Savarin, a connoisseur of the pleasures of the table. As in all the arts, a masterpiece can be found next to bad copies and a poor orchestra can transform the most sublime music into a hideous cacophony. Without training in beauty and poetry the public's tastes will be debased.

Hence the needs for art schools and clubs, academies and institutions, exhibitions and exchanges. As the cradle of all the arts Europe is also the cradle of a gastronomy as exquisite as it is varied: moussaka and roastbeef, ratatouille and risotto are as much part of our culture as the Mona Lisa and "Gargantua and Pantagruel", the Ninth Symphony and "King Lear".

To both enrich and protect this heritage, the Spanish Euro-MP Manuel Cantarero del Castillo envisages the creation of associations of "Gourmet Clubs" that could enrich traditional recipes and help Europe maintain its lead over its North Atlantic rivals.

In his reply Carlo Ripa di Meana, the Community's cultural commissioner, pointed out that the European Commission fully shared these views, as it had made clear when that white-capped fraternity of "Euro-Toques", which brought together the Community's most illustrious master chefs, was founded in Brussels.

Euro-Toques has set itself the task of safeguarding and promoting both the reality and the image of European haute cuisine, considered as one of the liveliest expressions of European manners and culture. The Commission, not surprisingly, has expressed its readiness to look very carefully at any concrete proposals from that august body.

TRAVEL: The tribulations of Europeans visiting the U.S.

Long queues and bureaucratic nitpicking are the lot of those arriving in the "promised land".

If the Italian navigator Giovanni da Verrazzano were to return to the mouth of the Hudson river, which he discovered in the 16th century, he would need an entry visa - and even so would not be allowed to land until he had been thoroughly vetted by the U.S. immigration services. In short, he could expect a delay of several hours before setting foot on Manhattan.

Entering the United States is more difficult than one might imagine. Thousands of European visitors can testify to being subjected to an out-dated system of controls, which can involve up to four hours of queuing in the long, windowless corridors of Kennedy airport in New York, where passengers have been known to faint.

The German Euro-MP, Horst Seefeld, has been sufficiently upset by the plight of Community travellers to the U.S. to ask the European Commission whether, in the absence of any improvements, Americans arriving in the European Community should not "be treated in exactly the same way".

As the external relations commissioner, Willy De Clercq, noted in his reply to Mr Seefeld, the Commission believes Community citizens should not be subject to the endless formalities linked to the obligation to obtain an entry visa, especially as Americans can travel anywhere in the Community without one. However, as the EC does not yet have a common policy on visas, the Community does not have exclusive competence in this matter.

The Commission nevertheless feels that the abolition of checks at internal frontiers requires such a policy, together with a directive on the coordination of rules of residence, entry and access to employment applicable to nationals of non-Community countries.

The Commission in fact envisages a proposal for a directive on a Community policy on visas for 1988. Hopefully, those following in the footsteps of Christopher Columbus could then disembark more speedily by 1992, the 500th anniversary of the discovery of America.