

Eurofocus

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- This week the hazards of the news have united two articles on children in the contents of Eurofocus. If divorce has entered our everyday life, the problem of child custody is still a thorny one that leads certain parents to commit illegal acts. In any case, what is important is that the interests of the child are protected. European authorities are currently examining this problem. (See p. 4) Elsewhere, a broad public opinion poll conducted in the nine countries of the Community opens up a clearer vision of the attitudes of European parents toward their children (see p. 2). One finding from the survey reveals that a majority of parents refuse to accept that the future is too uncertain to take the risk of having children.

But do the facts bear out this optimism when a number of experts are predicting massive famines for the year 2000 ? (See p. 5)

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Where and how did Europe obtain its energy supplies in 1979 ? Next week our Close Up article will examine the energy outlook for the Community...

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TO SAVE THE WHALE FROM BECOMING A DINOSAUR

To disprove the old adage that "the bigger they are the harder they fall", new legal steps are being considered that would seek to protect the whale, which is the planet's biggest surviving mammal, from possible extinction. While the dramatic efforts which have been undertaken by ecologists in recent years to prevent whales from following dinosaurs and other species into oblivion have obtained world-wide attention, probably the most effective steps have to be taken at the international legal and commercial level. Thus far, the international negotiations aimed at establishing quotas limiting the killing of whales have proved to be insufficient.

That's why the European Community, the United States, Australia and other major countries are considering or have already moved to new and more drastic measures. Acting on a request by Great Britain approved by all the European Community Environment Ministers late last year, the European Commission in Brussels has just proposed that virtually a total ban be applied on imports of whale products destined for commercial use in all the EEC countries.

The Commission points out that while some European sectors may be affected, such as the leather tanning industry in Italy, substitutes already exist for all the commercially used whale products and that a short transition period would be capable of accommodating industries having to adjust to the proposed embargo.

There is also the possibility that a ban on imports of whale oil and other products will help developing countries associated with the Community since one substitute for whale oil is the yoyoba plant grown in some of those states.

PUBLIC OPINION : Parents are not abdicating

" Is the future of society too uncertain to take the risk of having children ? " This is one of the questions asked of European citizens in a public opinion poll the results of which have just been published by the European Commission in a report entitled "Europeans and their children". The survey was conducted under its authority by nine specialised institutes in the Community member countries. An absolute majority of 52 percent of the adults consulted refused to accept that the future was too uncertain to take the risk of bringing children into the world.

It was among men and women with the least amount of education and with the lowest incomes that those who agreed with the pessimistic statement were found.

Nevertheless, sentiments vary widely from one Community country to another. As a result, French and Italian respondents registered opinions opposed to other Europeans by agreeing by 51 and 57 percent, respectively, that the future was indeed too uncertain. On the other hand, it's primarily the British (69 percent) and also the Irish (66 percent) and the Dutch (60 percent) that are still staunchly optimistic about the future. Among the other questions asked was one inquiring what was the ideal number of children in a family. Two-thirds of those questioned, including those with children, feel that two (59 percent) or one (7 percent) is the ideal number of children per family. The number falls to 1.95 in Germany and climbs to 2.3 in Denmark, 2.5 in France and 3.6 in Ireland. There is nothing very surprising in these figures since Ireland is the country with the highest birth rate in Europe.

This survey also confirmed the fact that larger families, those with two or three children have more economic difficulties. They are the ones which most frequently comment about financial or housing problems, to which are often added a lack of leisure time, the absence of outside green space, or the uncertainty about holidays or suitable environments for their children.

Among the other interesting revelations was the fact that two out of three European parents find they don't spend enough time with their children. Underneath is a concern about the quality of family life leading to a better relationship between parent and child in all Community countries. A reduction in the time spent working to increase the time at home received support from the majority of those polled. Likewise, flexibility in organising the working day also received a great deal of support as a means of encouraging family life.

Concerning the length of studies for children, European parents continue to accept the importance for the future of their children of a longer education than they themselves experienced.

In conclusion, a large majority of the adults interviewed felt that parents are lacking authority and excessively spoil their children. On the other hand there was no support for the contention that current education allows the parents of today to be closer to their children than they were with their own parents.

LEGISLATION : Tackling the thorny question of child custody

The international abduction of children - often by divorced parents who resort to illegal action to gain custody of their offspring - is no longer just the figment of a writer's or a film director's very active imagination.

Cases of such kidnapping are increasing, helped no doubt by the fact that once children are taken out of their country of residence, there is very little that law-enforcing authorities can do to get them back to their legal guardians.

This is because legal decisions concerning the custody of children which are taken in one state are often neither recognised nor implemented in other neighbouring states.

The problem has been raised in two international meetings : The Hague Conference on Private International Law and the Strasbourg-based Council of Europe. EEC countries are members of both bodies and will be signatories of the conventions being prepared by them. Both the organisations are currently working on texts which should make international legal action against such abductors easier by setting up a system of mutual administrative assistance by states, on the one hand, and allowing for the international recognition and enforcement of decisions relating to the custody of children, on the other.

In both cases, however, adequate provisions are being made to take account of the children's real interests.

For instance, although The Hague Convention, which should be finalised by October this year, calls for the immediate return of children who have been unlawfully detained or removed by parents to other countries, judges are given the right to stop such a return if the person detaining the child can prove that he or she has good reasons for doing so.

Similarly, although the convention drawn up by the Council of Europe sets up a system whereby decisions on the custody of children taken by one European country would be immediately applicable in another state, certain exceptions to the general rule are recognised. Member countries who sign the agreement can set down certain reservations on the criteria established for the return of children, which would allow judges dealing with the custody case to refuse to return the child if he feels that it is in the child's best interest.

Such leeway given to judges is opposed by a number of countries who feel that courts should not be given such a potentially "dangerous" power of decision.

The debate, however, is still open. The convention drawn up by the Council of Europe will be open for signature as of May 20, and the Community, at least for the moment, does not intend to draw up any measures of its own.

FOOD : Where will the next meal come from ?

If there is one subject which is guaranteed to cause alarm among human beings it is that of world food production and how long resources will last. We always tend to take for granted the fact that supermarket shelves are well stocked and we find it difficult to imagine the day when we are really faced with a food shortage. But with some of the figures thrown at us from all kinds of sources we begin to wonder if the day is really that far away. Some of the more dramatic and pessimistic figures tell us that the population of the world is growing at an annual rate of 2.1 % and that, as this is unlikely to slacken before the end of the century, the population will double every thirty-three years. From figures like that it automatically follows that food production must at least double, even without allowing for the current shortage of food supplies. We are told that this boils down to the fact that food production over the next thirty-three years must undergo a similar development to that experienced since the Neolithic Period, i.e. over the last 8,000 years. With figures like this being bandied about it is no wonder that we begin to think that mass starvation is inevitable towards the end of the century.

That is a most pessimistic view. The combined views of the United Nations and the FOA (World Food and Agricultural Organisation) are much more heartening. The United Nations calculates that the world population will increase by 1.7 % a year during the period 1980 - 2000. What's so heartening about that ? Well, the FAO feels, after many studies and surveys on the subject, that world agricultural production should increase at a higher rate than the population. Heartening as it may be, it is still not as cut and dried as that. Agricultural production in many developing countries, particularly the poorest, does not keep up with demand but the FAO still feels that it is theoretically possible to master hunger within the next two decades, and the international community has been working towards this objective. One example has been the recent steps taken, at the initiative of the World Food Council, to draw up and put into effect national food strategies in many developing countries.

The FAO feels that possibilities for increasing the total area of cultivated land are limited and that therefore efforts must be made to improve yields in developing countries. Improvements of irrigation systems, supply of seeds suitable for local requirements and greater use of biological fertilisers would have the advantage of limiting the demand for increasingly expensive energy and phosphates.

But the European Community realises that food aid will continue to be necessary, not only in emergencies but also to improve the balance of payments of low-income countries which have to import food products. The Commission is examining the European Parliament's demand that the Community's own long-term contribution - which is already large - should be increased still further. That this can only be part of the solution is taken for granted. Some people have suggested a possible solution of a shift of consumption away from meat towards cereals with the aim of using them to combat famine. But the Commission regards this as out of the question both on political and economic grounds. It says that inside the Community, for example, such a shift would require or result in considerable price increases, not only for cereals but for meat and a whole range of other food products. A solution built only on increased food aid or on artificially shifting patterns of demand would be at the mercy of changes in political mood and climate. The Community's aim is, therefore, to make it possible for developing countries to increase their agricultural output. It is convinced that this is the only sure and lasting way to eliminate hunger.

THIS WEEK : What's been happening in the EEC this week ?

COMMISSION : Representatives of trade unions and industrial employers met with members of the European Commission in Brussels on May 12 to begin discussions about the possible ways of managing the amount of time worked in order to create employment.

COUNCIL : European Community Ministers of Energy gave their support on May 13 to a goal of reducing the amount of energy needed for economic growth in the coming decade, a first step toward working for comparable energy savings.

COMMISSION : Twice in one week in mid-May, representatives of the European Community Commission held discussions with high-level American officials. The first came in semi-annual talks with Undersecretary of State Richard Cooper and the second on a visit to President Roy Jenkins by new Secretary of State Edmund Muskie on May 14.

COMMISSION : The European Commission has just proposed that the amount of money spent for a new four-year programme of scientific and technical training in the Community countries be doubled.

ENERGY 79 : FACTS AND FICTION

The energy crisis, which was triggered in 1973, is continuing to darken prospects for the future and to preoccupy world leaders. Slogans such as "imagination" or "conservation" with which we are constantly bombarded sometimes also obscure the realities of the problem. That's why it is sometimes useful to take another look at the statistics. During 1979, the price of crude oil just about doubled. Daily world production of oil increased by 2.5 million barrels to reach 6.5 million barrels per day or some 4 percent more than in 1978.

Despite the cutback in supplies from Iran, the Organisation of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) contributed to this increase by one million barrels a day, an increase of 3 percent. The North Sea accounted for an additional 500,000 and Mexico, Egypt and Canada together produced about the same amount. What impact did all this have on the supplies to Europe ? The numerous demonstrations against nuclear energy and the campaigns on behalf of alternative energy sources which rocked the European Community last year resulted in virtually no changes in energy market trends in the nine countries.

The production of nuclear energy not only increased, but the rate of that increase even picked up speed as well. Between 1977 and 1979, the annual increase was 2.9, 3 and 3.2 percent. In 1980 it is expected to reach 4 percent. Nuclear power stations should come into service with more regularity, especially in France, where it is forecast that electricity generated by nuclear energy will increase by 50 percent over 1979. For the Community in general, atomic power should furnish some 13 percent of the total output of electricity.

As far as alternative sources of energy are concerned, their part is still so small that they do not show up on the statistical tables.

And petroleum's role in all this ? Consumption, despite all appeals for economies, continued to increase by 2.4 percent in 1979, the equivalent of 11.4 million tonnes, surpassing slightly the ceiling which had been set of 500 million tonnes. At the same time, the United States were able to reduce their consumption by 1.4 percent.

But this comparison requires some explanation. In fact, the per capita consumption of energy in the United States is still much higher than in Europe and the savings possible there could be much greater. In addition, industrial production in the Community increased by 4.7 percent in 1979, while it declined in the United States. Finally, it is also a fact that the winter of 1979 was particularly harsh in Europe.

Imports of crude oil by the Community increased for the first time since 1976. Only the United Kingdom, by increasing its oil production from the North Sea to 77.6 million tonnes (or an increase of 47.7 percent) succeeded in freeing itself from the dependence on outside sources. Exports of oil from the UK to other Community countries increased by 82 percent in 1979 and this allowed the Community to cover 16 percent of its petroleum needs from domestic sources.

But this surge might be short-lived because the jump in British output came about because 1979 was the first year of full exploitation of the four fields in the North Sea. An increase of only 3.7 percent has been predicted for 1980.

Should the increase in oil prices encourage the use of coal? For the first time since the creation of the European Community, there was a slight increase in coal mining of 2.2 percent in 1979. This was the result of increases in Germany and the United Kingdom, while the closing of inefficient mines continued in France and Belgium. In these countries, increases in production will probably have to await the gasification of the coal deposits themselves. In the meantime, the Community is increasing its outside purchases of coal to the point where, for the first time in several years, the role of coal in total energy consumption increased from 18.7 percent in 1978 to 19.4 percent in 1979. Coal imports climbed by 20 percent in 1979 and are also expected to rise by 15 percent in 1980.

There's also natural gas. Consumption rose an average of 5 percent last year (12 percent in Germany and 9 percent in Belgium, for instance) but production increased by only 3 percent, which meant the Community had to boost its outside purchases. Imports of natural gas represent 22 percent of the Community consumption. Half comes from Norway, 38 percent from the Soviet Union and the remainder is split between Algeria and Libya.

The overall picture therefore is that the Community's dependence on outside sources of oil is dropping very slowly. However, these are being replaced by purchases, from other equally foreign sources, of coal, natural gas and nuclear material. This slow progress cannot be entirely attributed to the indifference of ordinary citizens, even though they frequently seem to refuse to face up to the realities of the situation. Equally to blame is the pace at which the various administrations are adapting themselves to the problem, as well as the self-interest of pressure groups.