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SOCIAL: Coming soon - a European charter of workers' rights?

The European Commission presents its proposal to the Twelve.

To demonstrate clearly that the 1992 single market must benefit all Europeans, whatever their social condition, the European Commission has asked the Twelve to adopt a "Community Charter of fundamental social rights". The text, the draft of which was presented by the Commission at the end of September, constitutes a solemn declaration, somewhat in the manner of the French declaration of the rights of man, of which this is the 200th anniversary.

The Commission's proposal proclaims a series of social rights which represent the "European model", to use a term often employed by the Commission President, Jacques Delors. It contains the right to freedom of movement within the entire Community, freedom to choose one's occupation and the right to a fair remuneration, paid annual holidays and a work contract, as well as the freedom for trade unions.

The text also affirms the right to a minimum wage, especially for the unemployed and elderly, and the right to adequate social protection for all citizens. The draft does not overlook the right to vocational training and the right of workers to information, consultation and participation, as well as the right of men and women to equal treatment, which is already enshrined in the Treaty of Rome, the "European Constitution". Finally, the projected Charter recommends that the minimum employment age be fixed at 16 years - which is not the case in all Member States. It affirms the right to social and medical assistance for elderly persons and the need for special measures, aimed at the social and professional integration of the disabled.

The EC Council of Ministers should take a stand on this Charter in November. The European Commission hopes that the Community's heads of State or Government will be able to adopt it at their summit in Strasbourg in December. In any case, the Charter would not have binding legal powers. The Commission has given an undertaking, however, to submit to the Twelve before the end of this year an action programme containing a series of draft "European laws", aimed at implementing the principles set out in the Charter. For the moment, most capitals have reacted favourably, although London has expressed its "disappointment".

TRANSPORT AND ENVIRONMENT: The electric fairy comes to the help of both

Electric cars are not rated very highly by either manufacturers or consumers, even though they are cleaner and quieter. In a world which worships speed, they are dismissed as much too slow. And yet electric cars are already a viable means of transport in urban areas, despite the rather slow progress in developing suitable batteries.

Proof of this was provided recently, in the presence of the European transport commissioner, Karel Van Miert, at a demonstration organized in the Belgian city of Bruges. The choice of Bruges, this "Venice of the North", was hardly accidental: the plain fact is that car exhaust gases are slowly eating away many of Europe's historical cities.

The event furnished concrete proof that the electric cars already available can be operated in cities without any problem. It also drew attention to the "ecological" advantages of such vehicles. Perhaps most important of all, the demonstration in Bruges could spark off a Community-wide interest in electric cars as an effective solution to the twin problems of traffic jams and atmospheric pollution, as Mr Van Miert pointed out.

Should several European cities now favour this solution, it could prove a decisive factor in the introduction of electric cars on a significant scale. The fact is the market for such cars is potentially very large: it was put at seven million for Western Europe as a whole during a conference devoted to this subject, which was held in Brussels in 1987. But the existence of this market has yet to be demonstrated on the ground, as it were.

An association of European cities, dedicated to promoting the electric car, would make it easier to (1) find out just what electric cars are capable of, given the present level of technology and (2) list the needs which they could meet. Such an association would also enable cities to indicate which of several possible solutions they would prefer: reserved zones, unmarked police cars, electrified public transport, preferential treatment for electric cars, etc. This would enable cities to prepare estimates of the market for electric cars, and to detail the measures they would be prepared to adopt to ensure it actually comes about.

This could provide the necessary bait for car manufacturers.

ENERGY: The great challenge of the year 2010

Lower consumption, less pollution and not too high a price: a European solution.

Over the next 20 years or so the 12-nation European Community can improve its living standard even while raising energy consumption only slightly and reducing both the level of pollution and its dependence on outside suppliers. This is the claim made, not by dreamers or false prophets, but the European Commission, in a report published at the end of September. Its aim is to provide food for thought to the governments of the Twelve and to all who help decide the kinds and quantities of energy we consume - to all of us, in fact.

The opening words of the report set the tone: "Energy is politics in the noblest sense of the word." In other words, it is an area which touches on numerous aspects of our lives and our society and which imposes difficult choices. While the European Commission cannot choose in place of the Twelve, it tries to show what will happen if, on the one hand, the laws of supply and demand are allowed free play and, on the other, the Community embarks on a genuine energy policy.

The Commission has chosen three scenarios for the years up to 2010. The first is based on a "business as usual" hypothesis; the second shows things going wrong, while the third scenario holds out hope. In the first scenario Community population rises slowly, while its living standard goes up sharply. It uses more energy, which it buys at reasonable prices. But there are increased emissions of carbon dioxide, whose disastrous effects on the atmosphere and climate need no further proof. This scenario assumes that the Twelve continue to behave much as at present.

The second scenario is based in the same hypothesis but assumes that the single market creates more additional wealth than envisaged, in an international economic situation which is brighter than forecast. The result is a sharp rise in energy consumption, together with rising prices. This leads to supply problems and to a certain increase in pollution levels.

The third scenario implies a voluntary act on the part of the European Community - that is to say, the implementation of a common energy policy. The Commission stresses that it does not envisage a recourse to some technological "miracle", but only the adoption of a number of measures: the application of strict "ecological" standards; the

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systematic and compulsory utilization of energy saving technologies, backed by incentives and, finally, a change in the energy consumption pattern - less recourse to coal and oil, because of the pollution they generate, and greater use of natural gas, nuclear energy and new and renewable sources of energy.

This solution would make it possible to reduce per capita energy consumption in 2010 to a level below that of 1987, according to the Commission, even while reducing atmospheric emissions of carbon dioxide. But this strategy would imply changes which would not be to everyone's liking in Europe. Motorists would not only have to buy "clean" cars with low fuel consumption, but also take the train or underground on occasion, as well as other means of transport that do not run on oil- and which would have to be developed, in any case.

In the same way companies with goods to ship would have to make less use of road transport and turn instead to the railways and waterways-rivers, canals, etc. This option implies a certain integration of EC transport and electricity distribution networks, in order to ensure that an increase in demand in one country can be easily met through higher production in another EC country. This, too, would go against firmly established national habits. Finally, this scenario assumes that in the year 2010 nuclear production capacity would have practically doubled in relation to current levels. But nuclear energy is not without its enemies in the EC.

Debate has been launched - but the Twelve obviously cannot wait until 2010 to make up their minds.

ENVIRONMENT: Tropical rain forests also are of interest to Europe

The Twelve will act to conserve and restore them.

Tropical forests are to be found in exotic lands the majority of Europeans will never visit. But the death sentence which hangs over them concerns all Europeans - as well as the planet's other inhabitants. Not surprisingly, therefore, the Community's environment ministers decided on 19 September to do all they can to halt their destruction, in collaboration with the countries in question and the competent international organizations.

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The fact is that tropical forests covering an area equal to that of Belgium - some 11mn. hectares - are destroyed each year, on the basis of official statistics for the period 1981 to 1984. But the pace has increased greatly since then. Last year Brazil alone lost more than 26mn. hectares of tropical rain forests and woods. The experts maintain that virtually all the tropical forests will have disappeared by the beginning of the next century, if no protective measures are taken. Only a few patches will remain in the Amazon and along the banks of the Congo in Africa.

The destruction of tropical forests is depriving the people living in them of their source of livelihood, threatening them with famine. It can also endanger the long-term development prospects of regions which otherwise are generally very poor.

But the tropical forests are vital to the planet's other inhabitants also, to the Europeans no less than to the others; in the first place, from an ecological standpoint. According to the FAO, the UN agency for food and agriculture, only 17% of the trees that are cut down are used commercially - of which some 13% locally and 4% for export. The remaining 83% is used mainly as firewood. As a result, one billion tonnes of carbon dioxide, representing some 20% of the global emission of this gas from the burning of fossil fuels, are added to the atmosphere each year. But it is carbon dioxide which is mainly responsible for the greenhouse effect, which threatens to upset the world's climatic balance.

The death of tropical forests also means the disappearance of numerous animal and plant species. While these forests cover no more than 7% of the earth's surface, they contain some 50% of its species. However, between 3 to 50 species are becoming extinct daily with the destruction of tropical forests, according to the experts. But many tropical plants have medicinal value; they are at the basis of medicines used in heart surgery, in the treatment of multiple sclerosis and in the manufacture of oral contraceptives. In addition, tropical forests provide cane, rubber, resins and palm oil, used in the manufacture both of icecream and tinsplate. Finally, the use of species of sugarcane and coffee found in the wild has made it possible to save plantations in other regions. In fact biotechnology should lead to numerous developments along these lines, according to the European Commission.

It is hardly surprising, therefore, that the Twelve should have asked the Commission and its experts to prepare detailed measures for their examination at the end of November.

SOCIAL: Compensating victims of violence

The European Parliament wants the EC to legislate.

A bomb goes off in a railway station, or a restaurant or some other place frequented by the public. Dozens, if not more, are killed or injured. Aside from the horror and irreparable suffering, the question that arises is: Who is to compensate the victims, who have suffered not only physical and material but also psychological and social damage? For centuries European states were in no doubt: their criminal codes stipulated that the aggressor had to compensate his victims for their injuries and suffering. Compensation could be sought by means of a special, and often laborious, civil action, or within the framework of penal law itself, according to the national legislative systems. And what if the aggressor could not be identified, or had taken flight - or was bankrupt? The victim clearly had to choose his aggressor carefully.

The situation has changed in recent years, especially as regards the frequency and scale of violence. As a result, States are beginning to accept responsibility for compensating the victims of such violence - not because of their own failure to protect the innocent but from an application of the principle of collective solidarity between members of the same society.

As is usually the case in such matters, the situation varies greatly from one EC Member State to another. Only in Italy, Spain, Portugal and Greece is there an absence of legislation providing for compensation to be paid to the victims of criminal violence from public funds, although in both Italy and Spain there are measures covering the victims of terrorist action. In some countries, including France, Germany, Belgium and Luxembourg, only victims who are nationals of the country in question are entitled to compensation, unless they are covered by a reciprocity agreement. It must be added, however, that a recent ruling of the European Court of Justice has held such discrimination to be contrary to the EC Treaties.

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The fact remains that so far no Community legislation dealing with this matter has been proposed, much less adopted. The European Parliament, not surprisingly, feels that it is time the situation was remedied, even if the task of harmonization is an especially delicate one, given that the area of criminal law lies generally within the competence of national States. However, the question of compensating victims of violence is closely linked to questions of risk and social security, and as such it must be seen as a social benefit in the broad sense of the term. Viewed in this light, a legal basis for intervention by the Community can certainly be said to exist.

The European Parliament has asked the European Commission to draw up, without delay, a directive requiring Member States to (1) harmonize upwards compensation for victims of violence, irrespective of their nationality and (2) set up a reserve fund for emergency aid. Compensation would cover notably present or future loss of income; medical and hospital expenses; funeral expenses and, in the case of dependents, the loss of their means of subsistence, together with their physical and moral suffering.

Over and above these legal arrangements, society must envisage other ways of helping victims. These involve the social services, hospitals, police, regional and local bodies, associations and individuals themselves, who would be engaged in a series of actions that would have to be coordinated and given direction. In this connection it is particularly important to undertake action aimed at keeping victims better informed and helping to create, within the police and the courts, a special service to take charge of them.

It is not because nothing can compensate for some kinds of suffering that society must not assume responsibility for compensation.

A PEOPLE'S EUROPE: Fines which must be paid on the spot

Why must foreign tourists pay traffic fines at once while nationals can do so at leisure?

Each year the same thorny problem arises on the Community's roads: that of having to pay, in cash and on the spot, the often heavy fines imposed by strict policemen on undisciplined foreign motorists. Undisciplined they may be - but no more so than their counterparts, local motorists, who are allowed time to pay their fines.

Even when the tourist can pay the fine he finds himself in the unhappy situation of having less holiday money than he had planned. The end result could eventually be a spoilt holiday.

A Spanish Member of the European Parliament, José Lafuente Lopez, felt sufficiently concerned to ask the European Commission to intervene. He thought it could call on the transport ministries of the various Member States to introduce a system which would allow tourists to pay their traffic fines after returning home, even while guaranteeing their payment.

Mr Karel Van Miert, the European transport commissioner, told the Euro-MP that the Commission shared his concern and recognized the considerable inconvenience which certain systems for the payment of fines can occasion Community citizens. The EC Commissioner assured the Euro-MP that the Commission was prepared to look into the matter, especially in the light of 1992.