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Mailed from: Brussels X

Journalists

TRANSPORT: The railways are set to make a come-back

The European Transport Commissioner, Karel Van Miert, is pushing for a network fit for the single European market.

"We are witnessing a veritable rebirth of the railways. After having been the backbone of the industrialisation of Europe and criss-crossing its nation states during the last century, the railways gradually became the Cinderella of the public services. However, the future looks extremely promising in the light of the 1992 single European market", according to Karel Van Miert, the European Community's Transport Commissioner.

He believes the proposals for a Community railway policy, adopted recently by the European Commission, represent a step in the right direction. Drawn up in close cooperation with Commission Vice-President Martin Bangemann, who has responsibility for the internal market, the measures aim at creating a railway network in keeping with the size of the single European market.

They should bring about, by stages, the integration of the existing networks and a relaxation of monopolies, with a view, not to the privatisation of the railways, but rather a liberalization which would encourage cooperation between the various networks. The main objective would be to separate the railway infrastructure from the provision of transport services. Ownership would remain in the hands of the existing undertakings, of course, but the creation of a genuine single market in rail transport requires much greater flexibility in the provision of services and far easier access to these services by other undertakings.

Concretely, the European Commission is proposing that the existing railway companies retain control of the infrastructure while the possibilities of access to it by others are enlarged. The companies established in one Member State should provide their services to users without discriminating between them as regards charges. The use of the network in the context of cross-border services, and the crossing of one or more Member States, should be authorized against payment of fees to the railway companies in question.

In order to ensure the operation of a truly European network, it will be necessary to carry out a far-ranging technical transformation involving the entire infrastructure (gauges, the radius of curves, axle loads, nature of electric current, etc.); the control and dispatching systems, as regards both the equipment in use and regulations; rolling stock and the development of industrial cooperation as regards both equipment and materials.

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As for the public, there is no doubt that the man in the street has been very favourably impressed by high-speed trains. Whatever the distance, these trains are far superior to the motor car, while on short, and even medium, distances they compare favourably with aircraft, being safer, more comfortable, cleaner from the viewpoint of pollution and less subject to the weather. What is more, with the completion of the Channel tunnel the railways will have conquered the sea.

The future clearly belongs to the railways. The fact is that the ministers of Britain, France, Belgium, the Netherlands and Germany recently reached agreement on the timetable for the northward extension of France's high-speed train, the TGV: Paris-Lille in 1993; Lille-Brussels in 1995; Brussels-Aachen in 1997 and Brussels-Rotterdam in 1998, when the Paris-London link will also have been completed.

For the present, all these cities will be linked only to France, with Paris at the heart of the system. But the creation of a genuine European network, with its indispensable links between this northern network and the Community's Mediterranean regions, requires the construction of a series of "missing links", at very high cost on occasion, so that a good deal of attention will have to be paid to questions of finance. Hence the Commission's proposal to the Twelve to draw up a master plan for the future European high-speed network and create a legal framework, so as to ensure the coherence of national priorities and projects as well as the technical compatibility between the various systems.

The European Commission has paid particular attention to combined, road-rail transport. During the last 10 years this form of transport has grown four-fold in the Community. Nor is the trend likely to be reversed, given that in certain conditions (crossing the Alps or the English Channel) combined transport is the only solution which makes it possible both to overcome natural obstacles and protect the environment. The Commission is therefore recommending measures aimed at making combined transport more competitive and more attractive - for example by reducing, in proportion to the distance covered by rail, the taxes road hauliers must pay when making use of this alternative. Similarly, a number of measures will be proposed on the technical level, or on the level of infrastructure, requiring the conversion of certain transfer stations, railway lines and tunnels.

The present proposals complete the common transport policy, coming as they do after the Commission's proposals for road, sea and air transport.

INTERNAL MARKET: Ten million fewer stops at customs posts

The Twelve eliminate the transit advice note.

From 1 July 1990 hauliers from the U.K. travelling to Spain will no longer have to stop at the Franco-Spanish border to fill in and present a transit advice note. This is just one example out of many of the advantages arising from the elimination of this formality, which the EC Council of Ministers agreed to at its November 23 meeting.

At present hauliers who cross an EC country must present a transit advice note on entering the country in question. It has been estimated that some 10 million such notes are deposited each year at the Community's internal frontiers. This figure will give some idea of the time that will be saved.

The measure, which the European Commission proposed to the Twelve early this July, was adopted with exceptional speed. It is one of a series of proposals aimed at making it easier to cross the Community's internal frontiers, pending the elimination of all border checks, after 31 December 1992. The measure has also been approved by the European Parliament.

MOTOR CAR INSURANCE: Improved guarantees for 1992

A green card for all and mandatory third-party insurance.

In the single European market motorists and motorcyclists will enjoy more comprehensive insurance against civil liability than at present. The EC Council of Ministers reached agreement in November 24 on Community legislation harmonizing upwards national legislation in the matter.

To begin with, all who are insured will automatically receive a green card, which is not yet the case in all EC countries. This means that motorists will be covered against civil liability throughout the 12-nation Community. All passengers will be covered through mandatory insurance. In addition, the victims of an accident involving motorists insured in different EC countries will have the right to be covered by the policy offering the more favourable terms.

Finally, the victims of an accident caused by a motorist who is not insured or cannot be identified will no longer have to prove that the motorist in question cannot or will not indemnify them.

DRIVING: Number-plates sans frontières ...

... but only in seven Community countries.

Some Europeans find themselves in an impossible situation because they do not have the right to drive their own car - nor that belonging to their spouse - if the cars are registered in a country other than their country of residence. The national authorities are so afraid of being defrauded they forbid their residents to use company cars which are registered in a neighbouring country, for example.

This should soon be a thing of the past in seven European Community countries: Britain, France, Germany, Italy and the three Benelux countries (Belgium, the Netherlands and Luxembourg). Their ministers undertook on November 24 to stop treating the motorists in question as people bent on cheating their taxman and allow them to use their cars freely.

Unfortunately the five remaining EC countries attach more importance to their tax revenues than to the freedom of the open road. They have not even given the same undertaking as their EC colleagues, thus blocking the adoption of European legislation to this effect. The European Commission, which has been flooded with complaints, still hopes to get all 12 EC countries to agree among themselves. For the present, citizens who face such problems can get the European Court of Justice to rule in their favour. But the process is a long one and cases are dealt with singly.

INFLATION: Fresh surge in October

A 0.5% rise for the 12-nation EC as a whole.

Inflation continued its upward trend in October, when prices rose by 0.5% for the 12-nation European Community as a whole. This was because of sharp price rises in Greece (2%), Italy (1%), Britain (0.8%) and, if to a smaller extent, in Luxembourg (0.6%), Denmark and Portugal (0.5%).

The Community's rate of inflation steadied at 5.3% on a 12-month basis. This was considerably above the rates recorded in the United States (4.5%) and Japan (3.1%). There were substantial differences within the Community itself. Here inflation rates ranged from 1.3% in the Netherlands to 13.8% in Greece. They were between 3 and 4% in Germany, France, Belgium and Luxembourg; 4.5% in Ireland, 5.1% in Denmark and 6.5% in Italy. The inflation rate was over 7% in Britain and Spain and reached 12.3% in Portugal.

REGIONAL AID: From slag heaps to sunlit beaches

ECU 2.1 billion for immediate priorities.

The redevelopment of regions hit by the crisis in the coal industry, and environmental protection on the Mediterranean coast, are high on the list of "immediate priorities" which the European Commission decided at the end of November will receive aid amounting to ECU 2.1 billion* in all, out of a total of more than ECU 3 billion earmarked for "initiatives of Community interest".

The money will go to fund programmes, each of which is aimed at solving a specific problem in regions in difficulties in the four corners of the European Community. This aid is in addition to the ECU 60.3 billion to be used to fight unemployment and develop problem areas in the perspective of the single European market of 1992.

The RECHAR programme will enable regions that are victims of the decline of the coal industry to start afresh on a sound basis, thanks to vocational training programmes for former miners and the clean-up and restoration of former industrial sites. RECHAR will also stimulate the creation of new activities and the launch of small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs).

To clean up the coastal areas of the Mediterranean, the European Commission will launch a programme baptized ENVIREG. It provides for the treatment of liquid waste and household as well as toxic waste, together with the prevention of oil pollution in ports. The first beneficiaries will be medium-sized towns of less than 100,000 inhabitants.

The STRIDE programme will make it possible to finance research centres and university laboratories, even while assuring a link with business to disadvantaged regions. Thanks to another programme of "cross-border cooperation" regions which have fallen behind economically but are located on either side of one of the Community's internal borders, will be able to join forces to improve transport, public services, energy supply and business cooperation.

A special programme is aimed at making it easier for regions on the extreme periphery of the Community to adapt to the single market. They include French overseas departments and territories, the so-called DOM-TOM; the Canary Islands, the Azores and Madeira.

* 1 ECU = UK£0.71 or IR£0.77.

A PEOPLE'S EUROPE: An unusual history book

A French professor discovers a new way to write European history.

Are conventional history books, with their strongly nationalist flavour and partisan accounts of events, on the way out? The French historian, Prof. Jean-Baptiste Duroselle, certainly hopes so. Accompanied by a committee of distinguished European historians, Prof. Duroselle was in Brussels recently to present the European Commission a volume entitled "A European history of Europe".

It will be available from 1 October 1990 in no fewer than eight Community languages (Danish, Dutch, English, French, German, Italian, Portuguese and Spanish).

Prof. Duroselle believes that the new Europe, born of the European Community project, is slowly recreating Europe's historical identity, which has existed from prehistoric times to the present, and Europe's creative spirit, which is characterized by a synergy between a variety of cultures, all of them belonging to the same civilization.

The new work was conceived in this spirit. Major European publishing houses have joined forces in order to ensure that "A European history of Europe" is the genuine history book for young (and older) Europeans of today and tomorrow.

INTERNAL MARKET: Safeguarding national treasures

The Commission seeks to protect the Community's artistic, historic and archaeological heritage in the 1992 single market.

In the 1992 single market national treasures of artistic, historic and archaeological value will be better protected, without benefit of special Community laws. To ensure this the European Commission would like to enter into a dialogue with the Twelve, on the basis of a series of guidelines which meet a two-fold objective in the fight against the traffic on national treasures:

- assure the mutual recognition of the national laws of the Twelve, in order to prevent the export to third countries of national treasures which have been smuggled out of the country; and

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- evaluate the possibility of returning such treasures.

It is time the Twelve ratified the UNESCO Convention of 4 November 1970, banning the import, export or illegal transfer of cultural goods.

However, the protection of "national treasures" should not unnecessarily hamper trade in works of art, especially as the European Commission plans to introduce a measure of flexibility in the application of certain rules and checks in this field. This will be good news for art dealers.

COURT OF JUSTICE: No Sunday opening for Britain's shops

There is no contradiction between the U.K. legislation and Community rules on the free movement of goods.

Britain's 1950 Shops Act, which bans shops from opening their doors on Sundays, does not contravene the principle of free movement of goods within the European Community. This is the sum and substance of the ruling of the European Community's Court of Justice in Luxembourg, handed down in a case involving the Torfaen municipality and B & C, one of the largest do-it-yourself chains.

The company had argued that Sunday closing was contrary to European Community rules, because it would result in a lower volume of sales, especially of articles from other Member States. In rejecting this argument the Court has strengthened the hand of those who are strongly opposed to any changes to the 1950 Shops Act.

Thanks to this Act you can buy whisky on Sundays - but not tea. You may buy flowers but not plants, pornographic magazines but not the Bible. Mrs Thatcher tried in vain to secure the repeal of the Shops Act in 1986.

AIDS: The Twelve reject discrimination within Europe

They also favour continued help to the developing countries.

The spread of AIDS continues at an alarming pace; more than four million people are believed to suffer from it world-wide. The European Community's health ministers reaffirmed in mid-November their opposition to any discriminatory measures against them and stressed the need to continue to help developing countries fight this scourge. The Community continues to give top priority to prevention and health-information in the fight against AIDS, within both the Community and the developing countries.

The Twelve maintain that HIV infection and the disease itself "in no way justify any reaction of fear or discrimination", and that, on current evidence, "there are no grounds for the systematic and compulsory screening of individuals ... without prior information or consent of the persons tested."

The Twelve point out that systematic screening is ineffective as a means of prevention and that "any discrimination against persons with AIDS or HIV positive constitutes a violation of human rights and prejudices an effective prevention policy." They take the view that the problem of AIDS must not affect the free movement of persons and equality of treatment within the Community, as guaranteed by the Treaty of Rome, the European "Constitution".

Some days later the Community's development aid ministers examined a European Commission report devoted to the implementation of the programme to help developing countries in the fight against AIDS, adopted in May 1987. They concluded that the spread of the disease justified a continuation and even acceleration of Community aid. The Twelve have asked the European Commission to take steps to this end, in concert with the countries in question. They want local populations to play a full part as well as better coordination between Community aid, the national research programmes on AIDS and the World Health Organization's anti-AIDS programme.