



a newssheet for journalists

Weekly n° 9/90

12 - 19 March 1990

S U M M A R Y

P. 2 ENVIRONMENT: A major source of concern for Europeans

They put environmental protection ahead of the fight against unemployment and poverty, according to the latest public opinion poll.

P. 3 HEALTH: Prudence is the watchword, even in the dentist's chair

X-rays are useful, provided they are not overdone.

P. 4 CONSUMERS: Credit cards on the table for 1993 ...

... and European rules of the game right away.

P. 5 HEALTH: Plastic materials will need a clean bill of health ...

... before they can come into contact with foodstuffs in 1993.

P. 6 SME's: 171 Welsh companies seek European partners

Opportunities to be seized, thanks to "Europartenariat '90".

P. 7 MEDIA: Europe must put up a fight

The European Commission proposes a Community strategy in the audiovisual sector.

P. 8 INFLATION: 1990 has begun rather badly

Prices rose by 0.5% in January in the 12-nation EC.

MEDIA: A new European journalism award ...

... and a travelling exhibition in four cities.

P. 9 MONETARY PROBLEMS: Gibraltar's currency - an unknown quantity?

Many European banks refuse to exchange the banknotes and coins issued on the Rock.

Mailed from: Brussels X

Europe for journalists

ENVIRONMENT: A major source of concern for Europeans

They put environmental protection ahead of the fight against unemployment and poverty, according to the latest public opinion poll.

Most Europeans view energy with mixed feelings: they could not do without it, yet are somewhat afraid of its harmful effects. Hence their preoccupation with environmental protection. Some 85% of the European Community's citizens even regard it as the most important objective of the single market for energy, according to the public opinion poll on energy carried out in the EC during the second half of 1989 by EUROBAROMETER. They put it well ahead of better electricity distribution (70%) and faster progress towards harmonizing technical standards (60%).

As for nuclear power stations, many are afraid of them, especially in Luxembourg and Italy, where 72% and 66% respectively of those polled claimed they represented an unacceptable danger, as compared to only 42% in Belgium, which is next door to Luxembourg, and 43% in Portugal.

Where the shoe pinches is in the area of information. Despite their interest in environmental issues, few Europeans are aware of the major threats to the planet: fewer than 40% know of the greenhouse effect, for example, and only 15% realize that it is partly due to the use of fossil fuels - coal and oil. The British are the best informed: 54% of those polled were aware of the problem, as compared to only 21% of French and Greek respondents.

It was the same thing in the case of acid rain, with 46% of Europeans able to talk about it, but with a much smaller proportion of what causes it. The Dutch led: 68% of those polled had heard about acid rain, followed by the Luxemburgers (67%). The Greek, with 18%, knew practically nothing of it, although it should be added that acid rain is not a Greek phenomenon. As for the hole in the ozone layer, it seems to have impressed people more, perhaps because of the publicity it has received. Some 60% of Europeans are aware of it; what is more, the differences are not as great from one country to another. Thus 69% of those polled in France knew of it, as compared to 46% in Portugal. And some two-thirds of them correctly attributed the hole to the use of chemical products, even if 30% also put it down to deforestation, 20% to the use of fossil fuels and another 20% to nuclear energy - everybody's favourite whipping boy, given that it is regarded as the cause of virtually all the ills of the planet.

(Contd.)

(Contd.)

When it comes to suggesting solutions to environmental problems, new and renewable sources of energy remain the favourite: two Europeans out of five see in solar, wind and wave energy, as well as in the biomass, energy sources which pollute the least - and are therefore to be welcomed. It should be pointed out, however, faith in these renewable sources has been shaken somewhat; in 1987, 56% of those questioned held this view (as against 42% last year).

Natural gas is regarded as the energy source offering the greatest security of supply and price stability. One person in four holds this view in the Community, as compared to the one in five who favours nuclear energy. Oil is the least popular form of energy, thanks to the numerous oil crises; a mere 10% of those polled were in favour of it. Coal was just slightly ahead, with 12% of the votes.

HEALTH: Prudence is the watchword, even in the dentist's chair

X-rays are useful, provided they are not overdone.

A small X-ray of your mouth and your dentist already has a clearer picture and can deal with your toothache more quickly and effectively. But everyone knows that X-rays are dangerous; and while your dentist can take shelter while X-raying your mouth, you cannot.

This is the raison d'être of the European Community directive 84/466/EURATOM, which sets out the basic measures for the radiation protection of persons undergoing medical examinations and treatment. It aims at giving them increased protection, without reducing the benefits to them from the use of X-rays for the purposes of diagnosis, early detection and treatment. One of the basic principles is that any exposure to ionizing radiations must be really justified on medical grounds.

This directive sets out the objectives to be reached but leaves to national bodies the choice of form and methods, as Commissioner Ripa di Meana told the British Euro-MP, Mrs Caroline Jackson. She had expressed her surprise that the British Dental Practice Board should require dentists to take at least two X-rays for a root canal filling. The principle that all radiation exposure which is not medically justified should be eliminated, together with all unnecessary X-ray examinations, is embodied in British legislation, so that it is up to dentists to decide, on a case-by-case basis, if two X-rays are medically justified.

CONSUMERS: Credit cards on the table for 1993 ...
... and European rules of the game right away.

When you buy electrical appliances, hi-fi equipment or expensive clothes on credit, you generally turn to your own bank or a local finance company. But in the 1993 single market you will be able to obtain credit or borrow anywhere in the European Community. However, you will need to be well-informed and in a position to compare the terms offered in all the Community countries.

In order to help you do this the EC Council of Ministers adopted on February 22 Community legislation which provides for a uniform method of calculating the costs to be borne by the consumer, using a mathematical formula annexed to the EC directive. This new legislation will apply to credits of between ECU 200 and ECU 2,000*. It obviously excludes credit for the purchase of new cars, flats and houses, all of which are covered by national legislation aimed at protecting consumers.

The new European method of calculating costs will come into force on 1 January 1993, although countries which use a formula other than the one adopted by the Council may continue to do so until 31 December 1995. The European Commission believes that in practice only one EC country will take advantage of this. At present some countries insist that their own formulas - not always the same - be used; other countries leave it to the banks and finance companies.

The new directive does not by itself offer the consumer sufficient protection; however, it completes another directive, which came into force at the beginning of the year and which aims to establish European rules of the game.

Thus hereafter all prospectuses, posters and other publicity must indicate clearly the cost of the credit - in practice the annual global rate. Every credit arrangement must be in writing. The consumer must have the right to reimburse before due date and he must know in advance the conditions under which the finance company could take possession of the object bought on credit in the event of non-payment.

* 1 ECU = UK£0.72 or IR£0.77.

HEALTH: Plastic materials will need a clean bill of health ...

... before they can come into contact with foodstuffs in 1993.

From 1 January 1993 only those plastic materials which have been given a clean bill of health by European scientists will be allowed to come into contact with food. The European Commission adopted on February 26 a directive ("Community law") which lays down strict criteria for the manufacture of plastic materials intended to come into contact with foodstuffs in any manner whatsoever.

Only materials appearing on the list drawn up by the scientific committee on food for humans will be authorized. European experts are currently looking at some 550 plastic substances for which manufacturers are seeking authorization, but without having supplied sufficient proof that they are harmless.

The criteria laid down in the Community directive, based as they are on scientific evidence, have been accepted by the 12 EC governments as well as the organizations representing consumers and manufacturers. They concern not only packaging materials and containers, such as bottles, boxes and bags, but also kitchen utensils and the machinery used in the food industry, including conveyor belts, for example.

The directive also stipulates that the plastic materials must be impervious to damage by the foodstuffs they come into contact with. It contains very stringent provisions in this connection, even in cases where there is no danger to health.

The new directive, which puts into practice a general "European law" on materials and objects which come into contact with foodstuffs, will be followed by several others, each dealing with a specific type of material. In addition to ensuring greater protection for consumers, the new Community directive will open the way to the free movement of a wide range of foodstuffs within the single market.

SMEs: 171 Welsh companies seek European partners

Opportunities to be seized, thanks to "Europartenariat '90".

No fewer than 171 small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) in Wales are looking for partners in other areas of the European Community. They are active in all kinds of businesses, from electronics and furniture to ceramics and film production. Some companies are looking for new markets for their products, others for modern technology, yet others for European products to market. Business profiles of these 171 SMEs are to be found in a catalogues released in Brussels on February 28, because they have been chosen to take part in the operation "Europartenariat '90".

After "Europartenariat Ireland 1988" and "Europartenariat Andalusia 1989", the European Commission decided to stimulate the economic development of yet another of the Community's regions in difficulties. Its choice fell on Wales. Hard hit by the decline of the coal and steel industry, Wales has begun to develop new activities and Europartenariat should help it to take advantage of the European dimension.

The 1990 catalogue, which contains all the offers of cooperation from Welsh SMEs, is being widely distributed throughout the EC through national government departments, regional development authorities and Chambers of Commerce as well as the three Community-assisted information networks (Euro Info Centres), the Business Cooperation Network (BC-NET) and the Business and Innovation Centres (BIC).

Companies interested in teaming up with one of the 171 Welsh companies can write to the bodies designated for this purpose in their own country:

UNITED KINGDOM (44) - Grant Thornton
1 Westminster Way
Oxford OX2 0PZ
Mr J Cable Tel: 0865-24.49.71
Fax: 0865-72.44.20

IRELAND (353) - Industrial Development Authority
(IDA)
Wilton Park House, Wilton Place,
Dublin 2
Mr B Donnelley Tel: 01-68.66.33 and
68.84.44
Tlx: 93431
Fax: 01-60.37.03

MEDIA: Europe must put up a fight

The European Commission proposes a Community strategy in the audiovisual sector.

"The European Commission is determined to act if competition in the audiovisual market in the 12-nation Community is threatened." This is the thrust of the communication adopted by the Commission and presented to the press in Brussels by the EC Commissioner for the audiovisual sector, Mr. Jean Dondelinger.

After the adoption of the "Television without frontiers" directive, in the wake of last October's Audiovisual Conference, Mr Dondelinger has drawn the broad outlines of the Community's three-pronged audiovisual strategy: setting the rules of the game, promoting the programme industry and mastering the new technologies.

To begin with, a new regulation. It will not prevent Member States from adopting stricter legislation and will deal with the problem of copyright, the question of pluralism and concentration in the audiovisual sector as well as matters linked to competition. The second prong has to do with the new technologies; it will have to take account of the changes in markets and services, especially the development of new broadcasting facilities based on satellites, the introduction of high-definition television (which should start on a regular basis in 1995, after a pilot phase beginning probably in 1992), and the harmonization and planning of cable networks.

The third prong envisages support for the audiovisual programme industry, with the continuation and intensification of the MEDIA programme, following the end of its pilot phase. The aim will be to improve the environment in which audiovisual companies operate, thanks in large part to the "EUREKA AUDIOVISUAL", whose launch was decided at the Paris Audiovisual Conference.

Like other sectors, the audiovisual must take the necessary steps to benefit from the single market. To this end, it must break out of its narrow national limits, a major reason for the inadequate profitability of European productions, only 10% of which are shown throughout Europe. The earnings of the audiovisual sector amount to some ECU 16 billion* in Europe, as compared to ECU 33.5 billion in the United States.

"The European Commission", Mr Dondelinger concluded, "plans to intervene, either by virtue of its own competence or in putting forward a multimedia proposal."

* 1 ECU = UK£0.72 or IR£0.77.

INFLATION: 1990 has begun rather badly

Prices rose by 0.5% in January in the 12-nation EC.

1990 has got off to a rather bad start as regards prices. They rose by 0.5% in January in the 12-nation European Community, because of sharp price increases in half the European Community countries.

In Portugal, higher transport and telecommunications charges resulted in a steep rise of 1.7% in the consumer price index. Other countries which recorded substantial rises were: Spain - 0.9%; Luxembourg - 0.8%; Greece - 0.7%; Germany and the U.K. - 0.6%. Inflation was relatively strong in Italy (0.5%) and France and Belgium (0.4%).

However, winter sales in the Netherlands and lower taxes on audiovisual equipment in Denmark led to a fall in the price index in both countries. For the Community as a whole the inflation rate has remained virtually unchanged since last spring at 5.2% on a 12-month basis. Both the United States and Japan did better, with rates of 4.8% and 3.1% respectively.

MEDIA: A new European journalism award ...

... and a travelling exhibition in four European cities.

The first of the annual Stendhal awards for journalism and communication in Europe will be awarded this September in Parma. They will reward the best front page, the best cover, the best presentation of European social problems, the best articles or series of articles on the European economy and the best television programme on Europe. The Stendhal awards have been created by the European Commission, in order to encourage journalists to look beyond national or provincial considerations and focus on the European dimension of the news.

The winners will each receive ECU 15,000*, to enable them to spend a year working on a newspaper or with a television company in another European Community country.

The Stendhal awards will be accompanied by an exhibition on printing and the press in Europe, organized in each of the four cities with a printing museum: Antwerp, Lyon, Mayence and Parma.

For further information on the Stendhal awards contact:

Ms Carole Depasse
Adelphi Foundation
22 Bd. Louis Schmidt
B-1040 Brussels, Belgium
Tel: 733-12-37; 736-94-14 and 736-94-15.

MONETARY PROBLEMS: Gibraltar's currency - an unknown quantity?

Many European banks refuse to exchange the banknotes and coins issued on the Rock.

In 1988 the government of the British colony of Gibraltar decided to issue its own currency. It not only limited the circulation of British banknotes and coins but also required tourists and foreign visitors to accept the local currency when changing money, even though they could not change it back into their own, or any other, currency on leaving the Rock.

However, what Gibraltar did was no more than take advantage of a right it was granted in 1934 under the Currency Note Ordinance. The Ordinance provides that the Gibraltar banknotes are legal tender in the colony, that they can be exchanged against British banknotes on a one-to-one basis and that the notes issued by the colony are guaranteed by a Note Security Fund for their equivalent in sterling. There is no reason, therefore, as President Delors stressed in his reply to the Spanish Euro-MP; Joaquín Sisó Cruellas, why banks established in the European Community should refuse to exchange Gibraltar's banknotes. True, the decision was theirs. And this in fact is their attitude as regards other banknotes denominated in sterling, such as those issued by the banks of Scotland and Northern Ireland, and which circulate in the United Kingdom alongside the notes issued by the Bank of England. The great majority of the banks in other European countries accept these notes, although often at slightly different rates; they also charge a commission, because of the variable cost of these operations. The European Commission, unfortunately, has no competence in the matter: the form in which a Community currency is issued is a matter for governments, while the right to exchange certain currencies, or not to do so, belongs exclusively to the banks.

All that can be done is to remind tourists and foreign visitors to Gibraltar to change the local money back into British or other banknotes before leaving the colony - unless of course they want to add it to their coin collection. If course all such operations result in a loss of time and money, both for the visitors, whose numbers are continuing to rise, and the banks. This is just one more reason for adopting the one logical solution to all these problems: economic and monetary union, with a common European currency.