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WOMEN IN SOCIETY: They don't want to be left behind in 1992

Commissioner Ripa di Meana presents the women's information programme to the European Parliament.

Women in the European Community have a key role to play in meeting the challenges represented by the grand design for 1992. The European Information Commissioner, Carlo Ripa di Meana, underlined their growing importance in European society when he recently addressed the European Parliament's Committee on Women's Rights.

He felt it was necessary to give women an opportunity to express their views on the kind of society they wished to work for in the context of the possibilities which would be opened with the completion of the single market in 1992. "Women", he told the Euro-MPs, "are now conscious of their rights and their values, and will therefore have a major role to play in this debate."

They must, therefore, give their views on all the fresh problems facing society because of scientific and technological progress, for these will be the major themes of the campaigns for election to the European Parliament in 1989.

Equal opportunities for men and women has become an integral part of European society and a major witness of a People's Europe. Mr Ripa di Meana, who was presenting the 1988 information programme for women, insisted on the influence women can have in the decisions to be made. He confirmed his intention to strengthen and develop the information meant for them.

The European Information Commissioner also announced the creation of a European prize for the television programme which best reflects the image of women set against today's social reality. The prize, to be awarded in the context of the European Cinema and Television Year, is in line with the wishes expressed by the European Parliament itself in its resolution on "Women and the Media", approved last October. The prize will be awarded by the European Commission and Madame Simone Veil.

The Commission also plans a publication this year on the theme of equal opportunities for men and women. It will also ensure that its film on this subject is widely screened. The Commission's publication "Women in Europe" will be brought out more quickly hereafter in the Community's official languages.

Two important symposia will be held in Greece and Belgium this year, on the problems of farm women, in the first case, and on violence against women, drugs and the welcome reserved for immigrant women in the second.

AGRICULTURE: Up with the CAP!

For 90% of Europeans agriculture is important, or even very important, while 46% of them approve of the Common Agricultural Policy.

Who says the Common Agricultural Policy is bad? Not the general public. A survey of attitudes in the 12-nation European Community towards agriculture has shown there is no truth in the widely held belief that Europeans look upon agriculture in the Community as a bottomless pit which would swallow up all the Community's resources, given half a chance.

The survey, which was conducted on behalf of Eurobarometer, an organ of the European Commission, found that 50% of the Community's citizens believe agriculture to be "very important" and another 40% "important". Fifty-nine percent of the general public (and 81% of farmers) saw state aid to agriculture as a "good thing".

This was a far higher percentage than for many other sectors. Thus only 11% of the general public and 9% of farmers thought state aid to the car industry a good thing. Other results were steel - 28% and 18% respectively; shipbuilding - 23% and 15%, and computers - 16% and 11%.

Finally, 53% (77%) of Community citizens felt that public spending on agriculture was "about right" or "not enough" as against the 22% (8%) who felt it was "too much". As for the Common Agricultural Policy, the Europeans agreed that reforms were needed, especially as regards surpluses; but this did not prevent 46% of the general public and 50% of farmers from regarding the record of the Common Agricultural Policy as positive on the whole, as against the 18% and 25% respectively who were hostile to it.

These findings are all the more surprising given that the Common Agricultural Policy has been the favourite butt of the media for years, and that for the man in the street it is often synonymous with butter mountains and wine lakes. They indicate that Community citizens have minds of their own and a far better understanding of the problems, and of what is at stake, than one would imagine. This was the point which the European Commissioner, Carlo Ripa di Meana, sought to underline when presenting the results of the survey to the press. "The main conclusion", he said, "is that for the Community's citizens the balance sheet of the Common Agricultural Policy is positive on the whole. A majority of them feel that agricultural spending is not excessive. And it must be stressed that this is the dominant view in each of the member states."

The fact is that even in the countries held to be the most sceptical as regards the Common Agricultural Policy, such as Britain and Denmark, public opinion, and especially farm opinion, is largely in favour of it.

(Contd.)

Of course, this support is not unconditional. Europeans want the balance restored between production and consumption. They want healthier food-stuffs, even if the price is higher, and public spending on agriculture to be better targetted.

Europeans believe the problem of surpluses can be dealt with effectively through large-scale distribution among the very needy. And everyone is agreed that agriculture has a primary role to play in environmental protection.

UNEMPLOYMENT: Unchanged in 1987

16.1 million unemployed last year, as the year before.

The hoped-for fall in unemployment failed to materialize last year. The number of registered unemployed, in the 12-nation European Community, remained at 16.1 million, as in 1986, according to Eurostat, the Community's statistical office.

The situation varied from country to country, however. The average number of the jobless fell by more than 10% in Britain and by over 3% in Belgium and the Netherlands. But it rose in Italy (3.7%), France and Ireland (over 4%) and Spain (6%). In the EC as a whole male unemployment fell by 2.5% on average while female unemployment rose by 3%. Unemployment among the under-25s fell by 4.3% but rose by 7% in the case of women over 25 years of age.

Nor did 1987 end on an encouraging note. There were 16.3 million registered unemployed in the 12-nation Community at the end of December, an increase of 2.6% over the previous month.

Eurostat points to a deteriorating situation in several EC countries, even after allowing for seasonal variations. The rise in unemployment in Germany, Italy and France not only has come after a period of decline but also has been higher than is usual in December. In Britain, however, the seasonally adjusted figures point to a fall in the level of unemployment.

AGRICULTURE: Not all that costly for consumers

The conclusions of the European Commission's annual report on agriculture.

Consumers in the 12-nation European Community must not complain too much. Yes, Community agriculture is expensive. But the rise in food prices remains reasonable and the level of these prices is generally lower than in most of the other industrialized countries. This, in substance, is the main conclusion drawn by the European Commission on the impact of the Common Agricultural Policy on consumers, and it is contained in its 1987 report on the agricultural situation in the Community.

The report points out that the restrictive measures foreseen by the Commission as regards production prices should reinforce the trend to more moderate food prices.

In 1986 - the latest year for which detailed statistics are available - consumer prices for food increased by 3.4%. This is not much more than the 2.9% rise in the consumer price index. However, in 1985 food prices rose more slowly than prices in general. On the whole, therefore, food prices have been rising at roughly the same rate as consumer prices in general. Thus between 1980 and 1986 food prices rose by 54.6%, the consumer price index by 53.4%.

The Commission admits that there is a tendency for prices to rise, given the obligation to ensure farmers a reasonable income, as required by the EEC Treaty. However, since the EC took restrictive measures in 1984, the prices guaranteed to farmers have risen much more slowly than production prices as a whole.

The report notes that food prices can rise for reasons which have nothing to do with the system of guaranteed prices. These include market situation and inefficient distribution channels.

Just in case European consumers feel they are worse off than others, the Commission publishes some of the findings of the EC statistical office, Eurostat, for 1985. In terms of purchasing power parities, food prices in the 12-nation Community were below those in Austria (by 12%), Canada (15%), the United States (24%) and Japan (56%). Only the Australians enjoyed lower food prices - by some 15%.

REGIONAL AID: More than ECU 600m. for the Twelve

The last three grant allocations from the ERDF for 1987.

Productive investments in the European Community's economic infrastructure and the creation of new jobs are being made possible by the last three allocations of grants for 1987 from the European Regional Development Fund. The total amount being made available is ECU 616.7m., more than ECU 515m. of which will be devoted to improving the infrastructure in eight Community countries. Another ECU 101.5m. will finance investments in industry, craft industries and the services.

The aid, which the European Commission approved recently, represents the 8th, 9th and 10th ERDF allocations for individual investment projects. More than one-third of the funds have been earmarked for projects in Italy and another 20% for projects in Britain. Other beneficiary countries include Ireland, Spain, Portugal and France.

The roughly ECU 100m. allocated to companies will lead to the creation of more than 8,800 new jobs, nearly 3,600 of them in the U.K., over 1,700 in Italy and almost as many in Germany. Several hundred jobs will also be created in Ireland, Belgium, Denmark, Greece and France. More than 26,000 jobs will be saved, some 25,900 of them in Britain and the rest in Germany.

All Community countries, except Germany, will share in the ECU 515m. earmarked for infrastructure investment. Italy is to receive ECU 159m. of this, for the development of industrial zones. Britain's share is over ECU 112m. and will be used to finance a variety of projects, notably the extension to Birmingham's National Exhibition Centre. Much of the ERDF aid to Spain and Portugal will help provide water-engineering and transport infrastructures.

The European Commission is also giving Belgium over one million ECU to support measures aimed at helping mainly small and medium-sized firms obtain access to new technology and the capital market.

SOCIETY: Equality in family allowances

The European Commission proposes a new regulation to the Council.

The European Commission takes the view that the family of a European worker has a right to the family allowances, except housing allowances, paid in the member state of the European Community in which he is employed, even though it resides outside that member state. Moreover, it has this right even when the worker is unemployed.

The Commission has embodied its views in a proposal which it has sent the 12 member states for their approval. It wants the new regulation to be made retroactive to 15 January 1986, the date on which the EC's Court of Justice ruled that Article 73 of the existing regulation was invalid. Under this Article, France had withheld the payment of family allowances whenever the worker's family was resident outside the country.

This derogation under Article 73 was intended to be temporary; the same regulation in fact stipulated that the Council of Ministers would look again, before 1 January 1973, at the entire problem of the payment of family allowances, in order to find a uniform solution for all EC member states.

The European Commission sent a proposal to the Council in 1975, which was acceptable to both the European Parliament and the EC's Economic and Social Committee. The Council was unable to agree, however, so that it became necessary to await a Court decision in the matter. Article 73 was held to be contrary to the principle of the free movement of persons, and therefore incompatible with the EEC Treaty.

The Council must now take the necessary measures to remedy the situation. Clearly, only the solution envisaged by the European Commission guarantees equality of treatment between workers employed in the same member state. Council action is all the more necessary in view of the need to revise the regulation, in order to take into account its extension to non-salaried workers.

TRANSPORT: Working hours for lorry and coach drivers

The European Commission proposes a genuinely Community-wide regulation.

The European Commission is seeking to kill two birds with one stone: to take another step towards the single internal market and at the same time improve working conditions for lorry and coach drivers, thus improving road safety. To this end it is proposing new measures designed both to clarify existing rules and to ensure they are properly applied from Britain to Greece.

In 1985 the EC's transport ministers adopted Community regulations regarding hours of work and rest of lorry and coach drivers. But these regulations are both complex and not very clear, so that they are open to a variety of interpretations; in fact they do not offer a genuine solution to the problem of harmonizing drivers' hours in the Community.

The European Commission wants to make clear how the existing regulations should be applied and to make implementation easier, with a view to the completion of the single market on December 31, 1992. Its proposals would also provide for an exchange of information among the Twelve on infringements of the rules by individual drivers. They will not be finalized, however, until they have been discussed by the joint committee for road transport, on which both employers and trade unions are represented.

SINGLE MARKET: Is the businessman's Europe stronger than the stock brokers'?

The European Commissioner for small businesses gives his views.

"Only the Europe of business and industrial companies will restore both Europe's confidence in itself and its level of prosperity and well-being", the European Commissioner for small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), Abel Matutes, told a meeting of the Spanish Confederation of Savings Banks at the end of January in Madrid. He felt that in the face of the tempest on the stock exchanges, hope lay in "the real economy", that of companies.

For Mr Matutes, Western stock markets are beginning to play an artificial role, with purely financial transactions outnumbering those in companies providing goods and services by 25 times. In his view the New York stock exchange can continue to dominate the financial world only because European exchanges are fragmented. He has stressed the fact that the 12-nation Community is the world's largest financial power. To take advantage of it, however, Europe must completely liberalize capital movements and create a European financial area.

ENVIRONMENT: Will Europe choke on carbon dioxide in the year 2000?

Some alarming forecasts from the experts.

Without determined action at the planetary level the amount of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere could reach alarming levels by the next century. The information the European Commissioner for Research, Karl-Heinz Narjes, gave the European Parliament at the end of last month was hardly reassuring, even if it showed that Western Europe is less and less guilty of this particular form of pollution.

Some 70% of the carbon dioxide that is being spewed into the atmosphere is the result of burning coal, petroleum products and natural gas, according to the experts quoted by Mr Narjes. They attribute the remaining 30% to the clearing of land for cultivation, and soil erosion. This build-up of carbon dioxide, in addition to polluting the atmosphere, could also produce climatic changes, in the view of many experts.

In the 25 years from 1958 to 1983, the level of carbon dioxide in the earth's atmosphere has risen by 7%; but the situation could worsen dramatically in the absence of remedial action, the experts claim. The increase in the quantity of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere could rise from five billion tonnes a year in 1974 to 19 billion tonnes in the year 2025.

But 30 or 40 years from now the culprits will have changed, according to certain forecasts. Those mainly responsible for the discharge of carbon dioxide into the atmosphere in 1974 were the industrialized countries. North America and Western Europe together accounted for nearly half the total "output" and the East European countries another 25%. However, by the year 2025 Third World countries will account for 27% of it.

The share of North America and Western Europe will have fallen to 25% of the total by 2025. Western Europe's contribution will have dropped from 18% in 1974 to 8% in 2025. Lead-free petrol and the various anti-pollution measures adopted in the West will have paid off.

Two of the subjects included in the fourth Community programme of environmental research, approved in 1986, are the effects of carbon dioxide on the climate and the possibility of reducing the quantities of this gas produced each year.