



## a newssheet for journalists

Weekly N° 17/93

10 - 17 May 1993

### SUMMARY

LIBRARY

- 2 AGRICULTURE: The fight against hormones  
European Commission proposes vigorous action against those who continue to use them.
  
- 4 EDUCATION: The fight against illiteracy  
European Parliament calls for measures aimed at ending the phenomenon.
  
- 6 SOCIAL SPENDING: Reducing the gaps between the Twelve  
But the payers are not the same in the various countries.
  
- 7 ENVIRONMENT: A less burning summer for Europe's forests?  
Firefighters receive three days of special training.
  
- 8 TELECOMMUNICATIONS: Towards a target for 1998?  
European Commission asks the Twelve to bring the sector into line with the single market.
  
- 9 BOOKS: From young writers to the history of the peoples of Europe  
Two ideas at giving books a more European dimension.

Mailed from Brussels X

AGRICULTURE: The fight against hormones

European Commission proposes vigorous action against those who continue to use them.

They're back again. Hormones, of course; but also other banned substances with which some farmers continue to stuff their cattle. They are in a minority perhaps, as the European agricultural commissioner, René Steichen, emphasized; but a minority which, nevertheless, can cast discredit on producers as a whole and destroy consumer confidence.

This is why the European Commission, after a comprehensive enquiry in all the Member States, carried out at the request of the European Parliament, is proposing a number of measures designed to ensure greater respect for existing Community legislation prohibiting the use of these substances. "The actions of an unscrupulous minority", Mr. Steichen declared, "are jeopardizing the livelihood of all livestock producers, putting public health at risk and destroying consumer confidence in certain agricultural products."

Besides, the enquiry has confirmed the gravity of the situation by revealing serious weaknesses in several key areas - in the transposition of Community Directives, for example; in the detection of fraud, in the equipment and performance of laboratories and in controls on raw chemical substances. Coordination between the various national services concerned is unsatisfactory; and if to this is added the slowness of the judicial system and, in some cases, a lack of clarity about the willingness at the highest levels to provide the necessary resources, it is easy to see why it is difficult to ensure greater respect for the law. Worse, the pursuit of irregularities has often turned out to be, for the controllers on the ground, a task that is not only thankless but also dangerous. And yet, as Mr. Steichen has pointed out, "it is only the complete and unequivocal application of Community legislation by all the Member States which can wipe out this cancer." The Commission, however, cannot assume the responsibilities of the Member States in the control of illegal substances, nor can it ensure the maintenance of order in the event of campaigns against the distribution of these substances. It is necessary, therefore, that following consultations with the European Parliament and the Council of Ministers, more effective measures are taken, in order to end such practices.

For the Commission, it is necessary above all to get producers to accept final responsibility. That responsibility should be reflected in a formal written guarantee on the non-use of anabolic and other banned substances. In this connection the European Commission will propose a total prohibition on the use of Beta-Agonists, which are currently authorized for the treatment of certain infections, but which have a secondary effect of producing heavier cattle. The written undertaking by producers could therefore be among the documents to be provided by them when applying for Community financed aids under the Common Agricultural Policy. In the event of this undertaking not being respected, the producer's entitlement to aid would be automatically forfeit for one year for an initial infringement, and for an unlimited period for subsequent infringements. Failure to cooperate with the investigating authorities would also be a valid reason for refusing aids, while animals treated with illegal substances would be destroyed in a rendering plant, without compensation.

The owners and management of abattoirs also have a key role to play in the control of abuse of illegal substances. Their licence to operate and receive Community aid would be withdrawn, should they fail to cooperate with the inspectors. Member States in addition should be required to publish the names and addresses of slaughtering establishments at which the inspectors would have discovered animals treated with hormones or other banned substances.

Finally, a sense of responsibility should be instilled in manufacturers of animal feedstuffs, as well as pharmacists, veterinarians and importers of veterinary medicines, and they should be alerted to the fight against prohibited substances. As for the Commission, it plans to review the conditions for the approval of feedingstuff manufacturers.

Controls will have to be further strengthened, with regular investigations covering a minimum of 0.1% of all fattening animals (bovines) on farms, and 0.05% of such animals at the abattoir. In the case of suspect farms a minimum of 30% of animals should be tested.

One last defense against the possibility that controls will not succeed in uncovering all cases of infringement, given that increasingly sophisticated prohibited substances are continually being developed: the introduction of a maximum carcass weight for sales at intervention prices. Such a measure would remove the incentive to produce artificially well-formed carcasses. What is more, consumers would once again find their mouths watering at the sight of a juicy steak.

#### EDUCATION: The fight against illiteracy

European Parliament calls for measures aimed at ending the phenomenon.

Nearly 60mn. people in the European Community can neither read nor write. They account for 15% to 20% of the population: it is difficult to be more precise, in view of the number of people who somehow managed to learn to read and write - only to forget everything. All attempts to evaluate the scale of the problem have run into yet another difficulty: the tendency to hide what is regarded as a "shameful handicap". But this only makes it more difficult for the illiterate to overcome their handicap - a veritable Catch 22 situation! The fact remains that the statistics on illiteracy point to a cultural poverty in a Europe which nevertheless is both rich and developed, as the French Euro-MP, Mrs Nora Mebrak-Zaïdi, has underlined in her report.

Although the countries hardest hit by the problem of illiteracy are Greece, Portugal and Spain - which nevertheless have made considerable efforts to deal with it - no EC country is entirely free of it. In adopting Mrs Mebrak-Zaïdi's report the European Parliament has asked the European Commission to coordinate both the activities and initiatives of the regional, national and Community authorities aimed at teaching adults to read and write. Euro-MPs have also called on the Commission to draw up an action programme designed to eradicate the phenomenon, with specific measures aimed at women, gypsies and immigrants. In addition, the Commission should present within a year a study on the social and economic cost of illiteracy in the Community.

The European Parliament also wants the Member States and EC Council of Ministers to adopt a series of measures, in particular measures aimed at promoting reading, encouraging the use of television for remedial courses aimed at both children and adults and recourse to videorecorders in schools. It would also be necessary to develop literacy programmes for recruits to the armed forces and improve medical checks in schools, so that children with problems of hearing and eyesight, and therefore in danger of failing their studies, can be treated at as early an age as possible.

Finally, Mrs Mebrak-Zaïdi calls on the governments of the Member States to deal with the forbidden subject of the limits of compulsory schooling from the viewpoint of level of skills acquired by children and not simply their age.

Replying on behalf of the European Commission, Mrs Christiane Scrivener assured Euro-MPs that account will be taken of the report: the Commission will adopt measures as soon as the Maastricht Treaty has been definitively adopted, inasmuch as the Treaty gives the Commission competence in certain areas of education. Within the limits of its competence under the existing Treaties, the Commission is already supporting pilot projects and fighting illiteracy within the framework of Programme 3 of the fight against poverty and the EC's "HORIZON" programme. In addition, it is carrying out a study on illiteracy in the various EC countries in collaboration with the Member States and competent bodies. Illiteracy must be seen as a phenomenon which endangers social cohesion and marginalizes millions of Europeans.

**SOCIAL SPENDING: Reducing the gaps between the Twelve**

But the payers are not the same in the various countries.

The 1980s and early 1990s have not been all that bad, on the whole, for social protection in the European Community. There was a steady rise in expenditure per head, in real terms, between 1980 and 1991, and the gap in spending between the various EC countries has narrowed, as is clear from figures published by the Community's statistical office, Eurostat, at the end of April.

The share of Gross Domestic Product (GDP) devoted to social protection in the European Community rose from 24.4% in 1980 to a record 26.3% in 1983. It then fell to 25.2% in 1989, rising to 26% in 1991. In 1980 the Netherlands, the country which spent the most on social protection, relatively speaking, devoted to it 2.5 times as much of its GDP as Greece, which spent the least. In 1991 the gap between the two extremes in spending, the Netherlands and Portugal, this time, narrowed to 1 to 1.7.

In 1991, the latest year for which figures are available, the Netherlands was the only EC country to devote more than 30% of its GDP to social protection - 32.4% to be exact. It was followed by Denmark - hardly 30%; France, Luxembourg, Belgium and Germany came next, with between 25% and 30% of GDP. They were followed by Britain and Italy - just under 25%; then came Spain, Ireland and Greece - just over 20%. Portugal was in last place with 19.4%.

Between 1980 and 1991 total spending on social protection - in ECUs - rose by 27% in the EC as a whole, and social security benefits by 32%. The elderly continued to be the main beneficiaries; their share of these services rose from 43.7% to 45.7% over the same period. Their share can only increase, given an ageing population.

But who is paying for these services? Employers to begin with, through their contributions; but their share is falling - it was down 41.1% in 1991, as compared to 45.4% in 1980 for the EC as a whole. The Treasury - taxes, in other words - was the second source of funding, with 28.2% in 1991 - a slight increase as compared to the 27.9% recorded in 1980. The ultimate beneficiaries of social security - you and I, in a word - contributed 23.8% in 1991, as compared to 1980.

However, the social security burden is not shared out in the same way throughout the Community; far from it. Thus the employers' share, which has fallen in all EC countries over the period in question, still amounts to 53% in Spain - the maximum - and to no more than 7% in Denmark - the minimum. The Treasury's contribution ranges between 17% in France and 81% in Denmark. Contributions from individuals range between 5% in Denmark and 40% in the Netherlands.

ENVIRONMENT: A less burning summer for Europe's forests?

Firefighters receive three days of special training.

With the return of summer the threat of forest fires will grow, as it does each year, particularly in the European Community's southern regions. But the firefighters will be somewhat better prepared this year. The fact is that at the end of April experts from all over the EC met in Salonika for three days, to take part in a workshop on forecasting the risks linked to forest fires, organized by the European Commission, in collaboration with the Greek agricultural ministry.

The workshop was part of a training programme in preventing and handling disasters, which is aimed at improving cooperation between the EC's experts, including firefighters and rescue teams on the ground.

Nearly two years ago, on 8 July 1991, EC ministers responsible for civilian rescue organizations decided to have their departments help each other when necessary. To this end they worked out the principles along which tasks would be shared out and costs met. Since then, joint training sessions have made it possible for specialists to prepare themselves for both preventive and direct action.

**TELECOMMUNICATIONS: Towards a target for 1998?**

European Commission asks the Twelve to bring the sector into line with the single market.

Telecommunications in the European Community is both a colossal market - more than ECU 130 billion\* between now and the beginning of the 21st century - and a public service used by virtually everyone, at least as regards telephones. Both the European Commission and all those directly concerned - equipment manufacturers, the various telecoms and consumers - are agreed that the sector must be opened up to competition by 1 January 1998, if it is to acquire a European dimension. But this must not result in the less favoured groups and regions in the EC being penalized. These are the principles which the Commission is proposing to the Twelve, after having consulted more than 130 European bodies, at both national and regional levels.

National frontiers still characterize the telecommunications sector in the EC. Telephone calls and other forms of communication between EC countries remain very expensive, particularly if compared to similar calls within the United States and Japan. What is more, the present situation is preventing the introduction of certain technological innovations. There are complaints from European companies at these obstacles to their operations, which put them at a disadvantage vis-à-vis their North American and Far Eastern competitors. Meanwhile the rates for local telephone calls are often relatively low, to the point where they do not fully cover costs.

The European Commission believes that opening up telecommunication services to competition would help European companies whose activities extend beyond their national frontiers, and provide equipment manufacturers new outlets. Competition no doubt would also lead to lower rates between member countries. But it would be necessary to keep open the possibility of special rates for less favoured social groups and allow less developed regions somewhat more time to adapt - until the year 2000, for example. In any case, the European Commission is opposed to rates being regulated on a Community-wide basis.



BOOKS: From young writers to the history of the peoples of Europe

Two ideas aimed at giving books a more European dimension.

Even the insular British and Irish are quite prepared to buy clothes and foodstuffs made elsewhere in the European Community; but like their Continental neighbours they draw the line at books. Most books fail to cross national frontiers, let alone language barriers. In order to give books a more European dimension, the European Commissioner for cultural affairs, João de Deus Pinheiro, submitted two ideas to the EC's cultural ministers, when they met in Copenhagen at the end of April.

The first is aimed at giving young European authors Community-wide exposure. Each year the Twelve would choose a fiction writer and a poet who had published a work during the previous year. The European Community, for its part, would (1) help pay for the translation of these works into all nine Community languages\* and (2) offer the translations to publishers. The fact is that for some years now the European Commission has been helping authors who have already made a name for themselves at home, but are largely unknown elsewhere in the Community, to acquire a wider readership, by meeting part of the translation costs and awarding a European literary prize.

Mr. Pinheiro's second idea is aimed at making each EC country more aware of the history of its 11 partners. In practice, each country would ask one or more historians to write its history. The EC would meet not only the cost of translation into all nine official languages but also publication and distribution costs. The books would be priced relatively cheaply in order to ensure a wide readership, while all the income from their sales would be distributed among humanitarian organizations.

At Copenhagen the EC's cultural affairs ministers launched a year-long campaign designed to encourage Europeans to read more. It is being conducted by the EC and the Council of Europe, whose members include all the countries of western, southern and central Europe - and therefore the Twelve.

\* Danish, Dutch, English, French, German, Greek, Italian, Portuguese and Spanish.