

Week of January 11 to 16

S U M M A R Y

- p. 2 ENVIRONMENT : Less noise in the house
As of January 1, 1983, manufacturers of household equipment and gadgets will have to indicate the noise level of their goods. The new proposal drawn up by the European Commission is designed to prevent noise in European homes but should not hamper the development of trade in this sector.
- p. 3 BUSINESS : New bankruptcy treaty ready
The Ten are currently studying a draft convention which would make any bankruptcy or receivership procedures initiated in any one Member State valid in other countries of the EEC. This will ensure better protection for investors.
- p. 4 EDUCATION : A legacy of European civilisation
Education is, more than ever before, one of the principal factors for economic, political and social development in Europe. A group of European parliamentarians have now stressed the urgency of launching a new Community action programme in this sector.
- p. 5 TOURISM : Doubts cast on special insurance schemes for travellers
Are special insurance schemes covering travel risks really necessary ? The question was raised recently by a member of the European Parliament and the answer is, to say the least, a complicated one.
- p. 6 FOOD : For a few million steaks
The European Community will have to import about 220,000 heads of cattle this year to meet the requirements of its growing meat-eating population ...
- p. 7 TEXTILES : A question of origin
The European Commission has drawn up new proposals designed to streamline controls imposed on the origin of imported textiles.
- p. 7 COMPETITION : Camerica sales infringe EEC competition rules
The Swedish manufacturer Victor Hasselblad has been fined by the European Commission for having infringed the EEC's rules on competition.

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ENVIRONMENT : Less noise in the house

The washing machine, the vacuum cleaner, the coffee maker, and the electric knife may have become virtually indispensable. But they are also very noisy. At times they succeed in turning the home into a torture-chamber for the nervous system when it should instead be a haven from the auditory attacks of the world outside.

In a society aiming at the preservation of a certain "quality of life", it was inevitable that concern would arise sooner or later about the regulation of noise from domestic appliances. In 1975, the French Government announced its intention of adopting legislation in this field. More recently, the Federal Republic of Germany and the Netherlands took similar action. But if European countries begin acting separately to adopt control measures that differ from each other, trade inside the European Community could suffer. The household appliance sector is among the most active in internal Community trade as well as being an important exporter. In order to avoid all technical obstacles to trade in this sector, while still taking part in the struggle against noise pollution, the European Commission has just submitted to the Ten's Environment Ministers a proposed directive on this subject. This proposal defines joint ways of publishing the noise level of household appliances. It also proposes the establishment of uniform methods of measuring the sound from such devices so that the information given to the consumer is everywhere. In addition, it would create a basis for checking the statements made by manufacturers.

The Commission believes that, as a first step, it would be better to have the manufacturers inform the purchaser of the sound level quality of their products rather than imposing noise limits on their goods. If European Ministers approve this proposal, the producers would be obliged to inform the public of the sound level of their household electrical appliances on sale from January 1, 1983. This information would be available either on a label or in an accompanying brochure. In some cases, a single label could give information about both the sound level and the energy consumption of the product.

Consumers would then have a new way of comparing existing products and, if they choose, buy the quietest one.

BUSINESS: New bankruptcy treaty ready

One of the unfortunate facts of life during the current gloomy recession period has been the steadily increasing number of bankruptcies and business failures.

From the industrial and commercial giants forced to stop their operations or be swallowed up by other mammoth combines to the small neighbourhood entrepreneur who has to close his shop and find another means of livelihood, commercial failures have been reaching record levels in many European countries during the current economic slump. Whether the repercussions of these failures involve the laying off of thousands of employees or the inability to pay creditors, they send shock waves throughout the economy. As a result of the growth of transfrontier trade within the European Community countries and the growing internationalisation of business in general, some of these related consequences spill beyond the immediate region or state of the business in trouble into other countries.

That's why work that began a number of years within the original European Community member states to reach an accord on cooperation in this important field has just been concluded by the current enlarged membership. The aim of this proposed new international accord is to overcome the obvious differences that exist in the legal and commercial systems of the various Community countries in order to safeguard the interests of creditors and other parties directly involved in such business failures. A previous agreement within the Community has already been undertaken to protect the interest of workers employed by a failing business by assuring their retirement and other accrued benefits.

This new effort is a follow-up to action begun in 1968 when the original six member countries of the Community signed a convention on the execution of legal decisions in the civil and commercial fields which aimed at ensuring that a judgement in one would have standing in another. This pact excluded business failures and related activities and work subsequently started on drafting a companion treaty covering such bankruptcies. This work was delayed by the enlargement of the Community but was essentially completed in 1980 and has now been presented to the 10 member states for their formal ratification. This would ensure that legal procedures begun in one country on bankruptcy, insolvency, receivership, legal winding-up or similar operations will be honoured in other states. This particular accord temporarily exempts insurance and credit institutions because separate cooperation is visualised in those fields. The new proposal is another step in European cooperation designed to protect interests across national boundaries.

EDUCATION: A legacy of European civilisation

When Mahatma Gandhi, the father of modern India, was asked what he thought of European civilisation, he is reputed to have smiled and said "Hmm, not a bad idea".

But what measure of civilisation we have experienced is probably based on education. From Aristotle and the Greek philosophers, through Rome and the scholars of the Renaissance, to Shakespeare, Voltaire, Goethe and Karl Marx, we have accumulated knowledge through the ages and few but the most cynical would suggest that Europe has passed directly from barbarism to decadence. Scholarship in Europe has often had an international flavour and many of our greatest thinkers, writers and artists travelled widely and worked abroad. Leonardo da Vinci's great patron was Francis 1 of France. Voltaire worked at the court of Frederick the Great of Prussia. Erasmus travelled all over Europe, Karl Marx lived in London and James Joyce wrote "Ulysses" in Trieste and Paris.

But it was only in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries that mass education was introduced. Schools and universities teaching similar subjects and offering comparable qualifications sprang up in almost every European country and education became recognised as a crucial economic, political and social factor in European society.

European integration in the post-war years brought a growing appreciation of the value of educational exchange. Building Europe meant building understanding between young people of different nationalities and teaching them about the languages and cultures of their neighbours.

But to achieve the objective of the European Treaties, to let EC citizens live and work in the country of their choice, numerous linguistic and administrative barriers had to be broken down. Central to the problem was the teaching of languages in schools and the universal recognition of educational qualifications from other European countries.

The rash of reports on reform which followed the student unrest of the late sixties formed the basis of serious educational cooperation in Europe. In 1980, "Eurydice", the EC Education Information network, came into operation in the four priority areas of transition from school to work, foreign language teaching, education of migrant families and admission to higher education. Now a group of European parliamentarians is pressing for a Community plan of action in the education sector. They want a policy of tight cooperation between European educationalists, with regular meetings and exchanges, and mutual recognition of studies and qualifications. They want more European subjects taught in schools and other institutions of learning, and a Europe-wide system of report cards and academic evaluation. Cooperation in higher education is also a priority, together with foreign language teaching and equal opportunities in education for disadvantaged groups including migrant workers, the handicapped and women. An action plan would benefit us, our children and the future of European civilisation, they say.

TOURISM : Doubts cast on special insurance schemes for travellers

A vast majority of European citizens who decide to visit other EEC countries during their summer or winter vacations subscribe to special insurance schemes which provide travellers with a number of special services such as repatriation in the event of illness or road accidents.

While these schemes are known to work efficiently, certain doubts exist as to whether they are really necessary for Community citizens who are, in any case, entitled under Community law to social security cover and hospital treatment or care in any country of the European Community.

In a question sent recently to the European Commission, European Parliamentarian Gisèle Charzat notes that these insurance companies could be collecting money from national security funds - money that Community citizens treated in another country would be automatically entitled to - while also receiving funds from the travellers who sign up with them.

While the question is clearly a pertinent one, the Commission stresses in its response that it would be impossible for its services to obtain details of the money paid under assistance agreements of this kind in the various Member States, since the firms concerned are private.

The task is made more difficult by the fact that individuals signing such insurance contracts are under no obligation to do so. Moreover, the conditions of these schemes are generally clearly set out in the contract itself, so that there is no case of deliberate attempts to mislead.

The Commission is not authorised to impose penalties in cases where such agreements give rise to abuse, because the question falls within the competence of Member States. The Commission has promised, however, to draw Member States' attention to the need for more complete information in this area.

Working on a Community-level, the Commission has also drawn up a directive on tourist assistance designed to harmonise rules governing assistance insurance schemes with those prevailing in other areas of insurance other than life insurance.

FOOD : For a few million steaks

What is, in the final analysis, a piece of beef ? It is nothing but veal that has been allowed to grow older and which has passed from the category of white meat to red meat. Let your imagination drift, and you can picture the various stages of pink through which that meat has travelled.

But few persons realise the extent of the European Community's need for young male beef. European Community authorities have calculated that some 14,815,000 head of cattle will be slaughtered in Europe this year. This giant herd is divided between 4,330,000 veal (young cattle weighing under 300 kilos) and 10,485,000 adult cattle, beef and bulls together.

In order to preserve the European herd, it is necessary that the same number of males be born annually. From the estimates provided by the Community Member States, a figure of about 15,785,000 males is seen as the annual production. From this total, it is expected that about 7.5 percent will be lost, which leaves about 14,595,000.

This total represents some 220,000 head less than the required number, which forecasts a deficit that will have to be made up through imports. The main suppliers of beef imports to the Community are traditionally Yugoslavia, Hungary and Poland. Poland's supply difficulties mean that it will probably be unable to help fill the Community deficit. Europe's steaks will therefore probably have to be bought in places like Argentina, Australia or Uruguay.

But the activities of the European Community in the meat area are not limited to ensuring an ample supply. Two proposals made by the European Commission concerning the health and sanitation problems linked to internal Community trade in fresh meat are currently before the Council of Ministers of the ten Community countries. This trade sometimes runs into the obstacle because of the different national legislations on the subject. That's why Newton Dunn, a member of the European Parliament recently called attention to the fact that saucages made in certain parts of the Community contained ingredients that prevented their sale in others. But if the European authorities have their way, hungry Europeans will be able to savour saucages of all shapes and tastes.

TEXTILES : A question of origin

European supermarkets are full of textiles imported from countries outside the European Community, particularly from the major textile-producing countries of South-East Asia. The exact origin of these products is, very often, not indicated very clearly. Apart from certain labelling which is now compulsory within the European Community, indications on textiles sold in the EEC vary according to national legislation. These differences make trade in textile products very complicated. This is particularly true as regards access to European markets and the movement of goods within the Community.

The European Commission has just drawn up a draft regulation designed to simplify trade in textiles and cut-down on administrative problems in this area. The proposal stresses that it is the Member State which imports and sells the product which will be responsible for checking the markings of origin. In practice, this means that, if these products are later sold in other Member States, they should not have to be submitted to a second control when crossing frontiers within the EEC. If the proposal is adopted by the Ten, it should go a long way in ensuring the transparency of external trade in textiles and would contribute to a better functioning of the Community's internal market.

COMPETITION : Camera sales infringe EEC rules

All camera lovers know the name of Victor Hasselblad, a Swedish manufacturer of high quality reflex cameras. While no one has questioned the quality of these cameras, the company's distribution network was recently condemned by the European Commission.

Following a complaint lodged by a British retailer selling these cameras, the Commission noted that the Hasselblad company, together with its exclusive distributors in Belgium, Denmark, the Federal Republic of Germany, France, Ireland and the United Kingdom, had taken measures designed to hamper the trade in Hasselblad products within the Community. These measures resulted in price differences for Hasselblad equipment within the EEC. Stressing that such a system infringed the European Community's competition rules, the Commission put an end to the distribution system and imposed fines on the Swedish firm and its European distributors. The British distributor, who made exports conditional on his prior authorisation, was subject to a particularly severe fine.