

Week of July 19 to 24

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SOCIAL: Self-employed win new rights

Self-employed people and pensioners are now eligible for new social security benefits under EEC legislation introduced this month.

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CULTURE: "The Dragon in Europe"

The sound of Welsh choirs and the glittering pageantry of the International Musical Eisteddfod at Llangollen in North Wales heralded a new sight this year, as one of Europe's most famous festivals of music and poetry got under way.

It's to be found in a converted schoolhouse on the banks of the river Dee, which flows by the site of the festival, and goes under the rather grandiose title of the European Research Centre for Folk Studies.

Comprising an exhibition hall, lecture rooms and a cafeteria, the Centre was born from an idea floated by the North East Wales Institute and Clwyd County Council two years ago and hopes to attract folklorists from all over the world to attend courses on European folklore given by visiting lecturers. The project has already won the support of the British Council, the National Museum of Wales, the Wales Tourist Board and the Manpower Services Commission, which provided labour to complete the £20,000 conversion free of charge. The organisers also hope to eventually apply for an EEC grant to expand the range of lectures on offer in coming years.

Says Clwyd County Council's Steve Nott, "folklorists often tend to specialise in a particular area and become introspective. Hopefully the Centre will broaden their views by introducing a European dimension".

Thirty students arriving for the Centre's first £200 two-week course in "comparative folk study" were greeted by an exhibition put together by local schoolchildren, entitled "The Dragon in Europe", showing the part played by Wales' national emblem in European folklore.

Interest in folklore at a European level recently received a boost with the European Parliament's adoption of Italian Socialist MEP Gaetano Arfe's report calling for a bill of rights for minority regional cultures in Europe. The report included calls for the teaching of local languages, history and literature in schools to bring about a resurgence of interest in Europe's richly diverse traditions, which, it argued, form an important part of our cultural heritage.

North Wales MEP Beata Brookes supported the Arfe Report and has been an enthusiastic supporter of the Centre, which is located in her constituency. She's particularly delighted that what was once a Victorian primary school should re-emerge as an international place of learning, with folklorists from seven countries in the first batch of students.

DEVELOPMENT: EEC aid for Central America

Characterised by political and economic instability for the past few years, Central America is in dire need of external assistance, if it is to overcome its major obstacles to development.

Some of the region's problems are clearly the result of its economic structure, including its dependence on exports of a limited number of tropical products and the absence of raw materials and of local oil production. The unfavourable international economic climate has also played a role in aggravating Central America's economic and social problems.

Inflation in the region currently ranges between 11 and 65 percent, and all Central American countries are faced with massive deficits and rapidly growing external debt.

While the slowdown has influenced all sectors of the Central American economy, the industrial and agricultural sectors have clearly suffered the most. Industrial production costs have rocketed following the increase in the price of imported oil and industrial raw materials. Central American agriculture - based on sugar, banana, coffee and cotton plantations - has suffered because of the recent decline in commodity prices.

External help is clearly needed if Central America is to develop into a dynamic region. This is recognised by the European Community which has set aside £36 million as special EEC aid for the development of Central American agriculture. A commitment to step up European efforts in the region was made by European Community heads of state at a meeting held in Brussels in March this year.

EEC action in Nicaragua, Costa Rica, Honduras, the Dominican Republic, Guatemala and El Salvador will focus on improving the rural sector. This is essentially because all six countries have already initiated reforms in this area, but have run into problems because of the lack of financial resources. The EEC's contribution to agricultural improvement projects can be seen as part of its overall efforts to fight hunger and malnutrition in the Third World.

In more concrete terms, action taken by the EEC will focus on reinforcing training programmes for peasant farmers, improving agricultural credit facilities and increasing food production.

Efforts to restructure the rural economies will go hand in hand with emergency aid designed to solve more immediate problems. EEC efforts will also focus on coordinating aid given to the region by Member States.

FOREIGN AFFAIRS: China Trade Boom

European trade with China that began with Marco Polo and virtually ended with the Cultural Revolution has risen like a Phoenix from the ashes since the death of Chairman Mao.

With the establishment of formal relations between the European Community and China in 1975 and the signing of agreements on trade and textiles in 1978 and 1979 respectively, trading between the two blocs has rocketed to more than five billion dollars last year.

Between 1978 and 1981 trade between the Community and China doubled and by 1980 the EEC was importing 1.4 billion dollars worth of manufactured goods from China, compared to Japan's 0.9 billion and the United States' 0.8 billion. Today Europe is still China's biggest market for manufactures. But for the EEC the trade still only represents a modest 0.7 percent of its total world trade. For China, which despite its immense size, only buys about 20 billion dollars worth of imports a year (compared to Europe's 350 billion), it has become an important part of the struggle for development. The importance attached to foreign trade in post-Mao China has forced a continuous process of change and experimentation in the structure of her state trading system. Powers have had to be devolved to the provinces and to regional authorities and new "Special Economic Zones" have been set up to make Chinese products competitive in the international trading arena. New trading organisations have also been introduced and earlier this year the foreign trade organs of China's central government were completely reformed.

Western business interests jostling for a slice of Chinese markets have been hard-pressed to keep up with the changes, but in Europe they have had a certain amount of help from the European Commission, which has provided seminars and work exchange programmes for closer links with China. In July a seminar in Brussels entitled "The Reform of China's Foreign Trade System" attracted top Chinese and European officials and businessmen and is to appear in published form.

EEC officials are becoming increasingly concerned, however, about the decline in Europe's share of China's imports, which fell from 20% in 1979 to 12% last year. Industry Commissioner Etienne Davignon reportedly voiced European fears that China's trade with the United States and Japan was growing much faster than its trade with the European Community, on a recent visit to Peking. But Chinese Premier Zhao Ziyang pointed to the advantages of distance enjoyed by Europe's competitors and reiterated China's interest in a strong and united Europe.

ENVIRONMENT: Move to save forests

As children we are introduced to Africa's tropical forests through vividly coloured comicbooks. We read about the antics of Tarzan and Jane and other legendary heroes who live amidst the most luscious plants and trees and awe-inspiring animals we have ever seen.

But tropical forests are more than just places of fantasy. They are major sources of income for a number of developing countries and the accent is very much on the economic and environmental value of the "tropical forest ecosystem".

Tropical forests cover approximately 9 million km² or 7 percent of the Earth's surface. They are found in Latin America, Africa, South East Asia and in Oceania. Three nations alone, namely Brazil, Zaire and Indonesia, possess 53 percent of the surface cover of tropical forests.

Deforestation probably poses one of the world's most serious environmental problems, particularly in the developing countries. It has been estimated that 40 percent of the tropical forests that have ever covered this planet have been permanently lost due to shifting cultivation, felling for firewood, the commercial exploitation of timber and the large-scale clearance for cattle grazing. Experts claim that between 24 and 100 acres of tropical forest could be disappearing every minute. Within the next 25 to 30 years, most of the humid tropical forest as we know it will be transformed into unproductive land. The prospect, needless to say, is alarming.

The reasons for deforestation are a reflection of the problems Third World populations face in meeting their basic requirements for food and fuel. Forests are cleared to grow food or to cook with. In other cases, the timber is felled to earn badly-needed foreign exchange. Tropical timber is used for a number of industrial purposes including the manufacture of plywood, veneer, furniture and chip board, to name but a few products.

The demand for tropical timber has grown in recent years, following the decline in available sources in the industrialised countries. In 1950, the developed world imported 4.2 million m³ of tropical hardwood timber. By 1973, this amount had grown to 53.3 million and this figure could reach 95 million m³ by the year 2000 if present trends continue.

European Community action to combat deforestation has focused essentially on countries which are members of the Lome Convention, the convention which governs EEC aid to developing nations. Countries like Gabon, Burundi, Guinea Bissau, Sudan, Mauritania and Senegal have benefited from Community assistance aimed at encouraging the planting of new forests. A total of £6.3 million has been used for such reforestation schemes. This adds up to a lot of tropical trees which should keep Tarzan and Jane happy for a few years to come.

SOCIAL: Unemployment tops EEC priorities

The fight to reduce unemployment dominated the activities of European Community institutions in 1981, as the situation on Europe's labour markets deteriorated. The total number of registered unemployed rose from 8 million at the end of 1980 to more than 10 million at the end of 1981.

In a recently published "Report on social developments in 1981", the European Commission says that social policies dealing with unemployment acquired major importance in both EEC policies and measures taken by member states at a national level.

The most important "social" event in 1981, says the report, was the joint meeting on June 11 of the EEC's ministers for economics, finance, social affairs and employment. The "Jumbo Council" meeting agreed on the need for a common strategy to tackle the twin problems of unemployment and inflation. EEC states now agree that two sorts of measures are required to alleviate unemployment, especially of a structural kind.

Firstly, jobs should be created through a policy of selective investment, a more judicious allocation of public expenditure and a better organisation of working time. Secondly, workers - particularly the young - should be more effectively prepared to satisfy the needs of the market, through a reappraisal of vocational training and education systems.

The second major priority issue discussed by EEC bodies in 1981 was the need to improve health and safety at work. Following the framework directive of November 1980 on the protection of workers against hazardous chemicals, the Commission focused Community discussions on worker protection against exposure to lead and asbestos.

Work also focused on bringing about what the Commission calls the "constant improvement of the living and working conditions of the peoples", recognised in the preamble to the Treaty of Rome as one of the essential goals of the Community.

Action in this area concentrated on the integration of handicapped people into society - 1981 was the International Year of Disabled Persons - and the adoption of a new programme to promote equal opportunities for women. A special report evaluating the EEC's first programme of pilot schemes and studies to combat poverty (1975 - 1980) has also been published by the Commission.

BUSINESS: Executives - what price?

Executives in Denmark are paid less than in any other country in the EEC, according to a report published by the Confederation of British Industry, the British employers body.

A Danish sales manager can expect to earn about £10,000 a year, while executives in similar positions in Britain, Ireland and Greece would be getting about £12,000.

In the Netherlands the same manager would be earning about £14,000 and in West Germany and Belgium, where pay levels are even higher, he would probably be clearing £19,000. In Italy he could be earning as much as £21,000 and in France, where executives are better paid than in any other EEC country, he could expect a salary of something in the region of £22,000.

But the figures don't paint the full picture, admits the report, as living costs in the different Community countries still vary widely. For example, while a two-bedroom flat in Central London may cost the executive £1000 a month in rent, similar accommodation in Athens may cost little more than a quarter of that amount.

The price of food and entertainment also reflect major differences between the European capitals, but the cost of luxury hotels, that other important aspect of the executive lifestyle, is fairly uniform at between £30 and £60 a night for a single bed with bath.

SOCIAL: Self-employed win new rights

Self-employed people have won the right to the same social security benefits as other workers who go to live and work in other European Community states. Under the new EEC regulation, which came into force this month, pensioners also become entitled to collect their money in whichever EEC country they happen to be living in at the time, instead of being obliged to return to the country where they worked.

The new legislation will mean an end to discrimination based on nationality and a system by which all social security contributions will be taken into account, regardless of where in Europe they have actually been originally paid.

Under the regulation self-employed people who work in another EEC country for a limited period will also no longer have to pay double social security contributions to cover themselves.