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Mailed from Brussels X

MAASTRICHT TREATY: A European Commission report on its functioning ...

... is the first contribution in the run-up to the 1996 Intergovernmental Conference.

The Treaty on European Union, signed in the Dutch town of Maastricht, is good in parts, according to an evaluation report drawn up by the European Commission on the current "European constitution", 18 months after it came into force. Its positive aspects include the projected single currency and the strengthening of the role of the European Parliament, while its shortcomings include inadequacies in the concept of Union citizenship and foreign policy. But the Treaty also has major structural weaknesses, in the field of social policy, justice and home affairs. The Commission's assessment represents the first stage of a process which must lead to improvements in the Treaty through a conference of the 15 EU countries, which is being convened for this purpose in 1996.

The Commission notes in its report that the 15-nation European Union faces two major challenges. The first is "to make Europe the business of every citizen", in a climate marked by widespread scepticism and incomprehension with regard to Europe. The second challenge is to extend the EU to the former East European countries that want to join it - but "without striking at the foundations of all that has been achieved in 40 years of European integration".

In presenting the report, Commission President Jacques Santer stated that there was no question of further enlarging the EU without changing the present Treaty. At the same time he added that the post-Maastricht Union was still too distant from its citizens, so that the risk of continued hostility and incomprehension remained. The President also made it clear that the aim of the 1996 Intergovernmental Conference was not to increase the powers of the Union, but rather to ensure they were put to use more effectively.

For the European Commission, economic and monetary union - the second stage of which began on schedule - is one of the main areas of progress under the Treaty of Maastricht. The recent upheavals on the foreign exchanges have made economic and monetary union even more necessary than before, and it is important that

nothing be called into question during the 1996 Conference. Another area in which substantial progress has been made relates to the European Parliament, which now plays a bigger role in the adoption of EU legislation. What is more, its approval of the Commission strengthens the latter's legitimacy. The report notes, however, that the procedures for the participation of MEPs in decision-making have become very complicated and will have to be simplified.

As for the shortcomings of the Treaty on European Union, the Commission believes that some of them probably are no more than teething troubles. Thus the new provisions dealing with Union citizenship, such as voting rights for non-nationals in their country of residence, have not yet been implemented in all member countries.

Other inadequacies can be traced to the fact that some parts of the Maastricht Treaty have not been implemented, either by the Fifteen or by European institutions. This is the case, for example, with the common foreign and security policy; here the possibility of taking decisions by qualified majority has never been used, thus condemning the EU to remain powerless on the international stage.

Finally, the Commission sees real structural weaknesses in the Maastricht Treaty itself. The agreement on social policy, for example, was signed by only 14 of the 15 Member states - Britain secured a permanent derogation from it - and therefore does not form an integral part of the Treaty. The Commission strongly opposes a Europe "à la carte"; in other words, a Europe in which each Member state is free to pick and choose. The many different types of procedures which exist make the Treaty difficult to understand, and make it unclear who is responsible for what. As for cooperation on justice and home affairs, in the Commission's view the legal instruments provided for by the Treaty are unable to meet real needs.

The 1996 Intergovernmental Conference should remedy these faults. Its two main guidelines will have to be (1) the need for the Union to act democratically, transparently and in a way people can understand and (2) the need for it to act effectively, consistently and in solidarity. Meanwhile, each Member state and each Union institution must help improve the operation of the existing Treaty to the maximum, according to the European Commission.

INTERNAL MARKET: A plastic driving license for 1996?

EU countries may introduce licences designed like credit cards if they so wish.

As from 1 July 1996 several European Union countries may introduce plastic driving licences, resembling the credit cards issued by banks. The fact is that the European Commission recently proposed the introduction of a standard European plastic driving licence, which EU Member states could use to replace paper licences from 1 July 1996.

The Commission has sought to take advantage of the EU's enlargement, and technological change, to improve the Community model for national driving licences, which was launched in 1986 and modified in 1991. It is currently in the form of a document printed on pink paper and folded in three sections.

Sweden and Finland, both of whom issue plastic driving licences in credit-card format, indicated on joining the EU that they did not wish to return to paper licences, as was necessary if they were to conform to the system in force. At the same time the UK wanted to incorporate the holder's photograph in a plasticised licence.

In order to meet these demands the European Commission has found it useful, therefore, to propose a standard European plastic driving licence, which can be used throughout the EU and which could incorporate a microchip at some future date. In order to avoid language problems, the new card, like the 1991 paper licence, would use numbers and symbols to indicate all the necessary information. It could therefore be easily "read" throughout the 15-nation EU (by car hire companies, for example).

The directive - or "European law" - by means of which the new driving licence would be introduced, would apply to national licences issued from 1 July 1996. But Member states would be under no obligation to adopt the plastic driving licence. Countries wanting to retain the current model may do so. Those wanting to make the switch to plastic would be required only to follow the model provided for by the directive. In any case, the directive would come into force only if adopted by the EU Council, which is made up of minister of the 15 EU countries.

EDUCATION: 227 university projects on European integration

ECU 1.2 million to be spent on creating teaching posts and courses.

As many as 56 new "Jean Monnet Chairs", corresponding to full-time teaching posts devoted to European integration, will be set up at the start of the 1995-96 academic year, under this year's Jean Monnet programme. The programme also provides for the setting up of 64 new permanent courses and 71 European modules, as well as funding for 18 research grants and 18 complementary initiatives. The aim is to familiarize university students with the various stages of the building of Europe, its economics and politics, and with European law.

Launched in 1990 at the request of the academic world, the Jean Monnet project is proving extremely successful with professors and students. More than 4,000 applications have been received since 1990, 565 of them this year alone. The project has in fact made it possible to set up some 246 chairs, 462 permanent courses and 322 modules. It has also provided 66 research grants and funding for 18 complementary initiatives in more than 500 universities throughout the member countries of the European Union. In a world which is becoming both more global and more complex with each passing day, sound training in European law, economics and politics will always be an asset for young people.

EUROPE DAY: May 9 is Europe's "national" holiday

On 9 May 1950 Robert Schuman called on Europeans to join together for a common goal, thus paving the way for an era of peace without precedent in Europe.

Fifty years ago, on 8 May 1945, World War II was coming to an end, and with it an era of intolerable suffering. Just five years later Robert Schuman launched his now historic appeal to Europeans to rally together in a common cause, with the result that May 9 has become Europe's "national" holiday.

The past 50 years have been years of unparalleled peace, democracy and prosperity. But the successes of yesterday are not irreversible, and the challenges facing the European Union are immense. What has been built up over the course of the last half century must be defended on a daily basis, to prevent unemployment and social exclusion and to encourage institutional reform, information and dialogue with the public.

... / ...

If the anniversaries marking May 8 and 9 are to remain significant and if the European Union is to continue to be the centre of peace and prosperity for the entire continent, the way forward must be pursued. These two anniversaries will then provide both a lesson from the past and hope for the future.

CIVIL PROTECTION: A Community action programme

More than 5 million professionals and volunteers belong to Europe's civil protection system.

In recent decades European Union countries have suffered major disasters, both natural and technological. They have included a number of earthquakes, including the one which struck Irpina, in Italy, in 1979, causing 4,500 deaths, as well as large-scale floods (such as in Piedmont last November and along the Rhine and the Meuse this January).

In order to cope with such situations a variety of emergency services, organizations and associations have sprung up throughout Europe, bringing together more than 5 million professionals and volunteers in a European civil protection system. In 1985 the foundations were laid for EU-wide cooperation in the field of civil protection; they are still being built on.

By adopting a new proposal for a Community action programme of civil protection, the European Commission has sought to strengthen Community cooperation in this field and to round up the means at its disposal. Its proposal defines action to be taken by the EU in the coming years, and sets out the necessary criteria and financing arrangements.

The action includes training schemes, exchanges of experts and disaster simulation exercises. It covers senior officials as well as experts and professionals in the field. These activities are designed to encourage pooling of experience in civil protection at the national level and mutual assistance in the event of natural or technological disasters.

For the Commission, the transfer of know-how and mutual assistance can help reduce the loss of life and the economic and environmental damage caused by such disasters.

It must be pointed out that these initiatives could be financed by the European Commission, either fully or partly.

The Commission's proposal attached great importance to the human factor in civil protection, given that it is people who suffer and have to deal with emergencies when all is said and done.

Finally, the Commission's proposal also provides for action to improve public information on how people can protect themselves in the event of an industrial accident, natural or man-made disasters. During a recent Eurobarometer survey, 85% of those polled considered better information on these matters extremely important.

UNEMPLOYMENT: Down to 10.8% in the EU in March ...

... as compared to 10.9% in February.

Seasonally-adjusted unemployment figures in the 15-nation European Union declined slightly in March, after stagnating for several months, or even rising. They fell to 10.8%, as compared to a rate of 10.9% in February. Announcing the news, Eurostat, the European statistical office, noted that the level of unemployment was below the level reached in March of last year, when it stood at 11.3%.

In the 12 months to March 1995, unemployment fell most sharply in the two EC countries in which it has been the highest - Spain and Finland. It also fell in Denmark and the UK. The fall at the EU level was more marked for men (down from 10.2% to 9.6%) than women (12.8% to 12.6%).

According to Eurostat, some 17.9 million people were unemployed in the EU in March. Spain continued to have the highest level of unemployment (23.2%) and Luxembourg the lowest (3.8%).

HEALTH: Philip Morris Europe S.A. throws up a smoke screen ...

... in order to attack non-existent EU legislation.

The tobacco conglomerate, Philip Morris Europe S.A., chose May 9 - Europe Day - on which to attack a non-existent piece of EU legislation. In a full-page advertisement in the "Financial Times", the company mocked EU bureaucrats for "recent European legislation concerning when and where" people can smoke, which runs to 24,942 words.

There is, however, nothing on EU statute books which stipulates where and when people can smoke. Measures to limit the exposure of non-smokers to the harmful effects of other people's smoking do exist - but they have been taken by Member states on their own initiative. Several of them have even banned tobacco advertising within their own territories.

The European Commission has encouraged this process through a very short, non-binding recommendation, as Commissioner Pádraig Flynn pointed out in a press communique. And it promotes a greater awareness of the dangers of smoking through non-legislative means. In particular, it supports measures to combat cancer. Last year over half a million people died from tobacco-related diseases in the European Union. The Commission, not unnaturally, is concerned to do all it can to reduce such deaths.

HEALTH: Victory for a passive smoker

A Londoner, suffering from asthma, obtains £2,500 from her former employer.

It isn't true that the strongest and most arrogant always win. Indeed, if more people followed the example of Mrs. Elizabeth Ashby, those who smoke would be more considerate of non-smokers. In 1988, the employment ministry recommended that Mrs. Ashby, who was suffering from severe lung problems, be transferred to a workplace for non-smokers. However, between 1988 and 1991 smokers gradually encroached on the area set aside for her, with the result that Mrs. Ashby fell ill in 1991 and had to be hospitalized.

The specialist who examined her concluded that exposure to cigarette smoke certainly was one of the reasons for her breathing problems and her inability to work. Both the medical advisor and Mrs. Ashby's employers agreed with these conclusions. She therefore lodged a complaint with the courts. However, a week before the case was to be heard, Mrs. Ashby's former employers, Chartered West LB Ltd., paid her £2,500 in compensation.

Her lawyer expressed the hope that people who felt passive smoking had harmed their health would follow Mrs. Ashby's example and seek the help of the courts.