

INFORMATION

SCIENCE AND RESEARCH

EUROPE PLUS 30

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"Europe plus 30" is an evocative image. Not only does it have more of a temporal than a spatial dimension, but it also expresses an "elastic idea of the future" of Europe, as the former EEC Commissioner for Science and Research, Professor Ralf Dahrendorf, put it, for it refers not to the year 2000, magic date for futurologists, but at any given time looks ahead to the next three decades of European development.

Behind the short and snappy formula there is an ambitious Community project whose € 300,000 preliminary phase began some eighteen months ago and is soon to end with a report. On 14 January 1974, the Council approved the new Action Programme for Research and Technology in which the Commission calls, among other things, for long-term studies of possible and desirable developments in our society. This does not mean that the EEC is reaching for the stars; on the contrary it is pursuing very tangible goals: it is seeking to consider planning procedures and today's political decisions in terms of Europe's likely future requirements, trends and needs and to increase awareness of the consequences of what we are doing, or failing to do, today. This applies equally to politics as to science itself and it is for this reason that the "Europe plus 30" study group is, at the same time, examining whether, and if so how, technology assessment should be institutionalized within the Community. The connections between long-term forecasting and technology assessment are obvious; certain discoveries influence man and his environment so fundamentally that they can completely alter life styles. The spread of television, for instance, has revolutionized our leisure-time habits. It is not only professional scientists who are being asked to think more seriously about the future.

What are the reasons for this look into the future and why should it be the European Community which is engaged in it? Certainly not to divert attention from current problems, nor because the Commission has got carried away in the somewhat flamboyant futurology movement of the past few years. The Community is far more interested in forging an instrument which is not beset by the inadequacies of previous ones: the focus is to be shifted away from purely scientific measurements to forecasts which take wider social aspects into account. Instead of creating new utopia, predictions should be specially related to the Community's tasks and its decision-making procedures. For this reason, the problems must be marked out in clearly defined areas for these long-term forecasts to deal with, and methods must be found which process scientific output to meet the needs of political decision-makers.

Lord Kennet, a former Labour Minister and for many years a scientific adviser to the Commission, has been in charge of a preliminary one-year study to find out exactly how such problems may be tackled. He is familiar with the demands of both politicians and scientists and knows their difficulties in communicating with each other. The fact that scientific forecasts are to be used in a directly political context, emphasizes the scientist's social responsibility to be self-critical of his knowledge and to refrain from political manipulation on spurious scientific grounds. On the other hand, scientific forecasts do not necessarily reduce the politicians' room for manoeuvre, but facilitate long-term political planning by presenting alternative images of the future, showing what is possible and what is impossible, what is positive and what is negative. They can also indicate the foreseeable consequences of a particular decision.

To many people, thirty years might seem too audacious a spring into an uncertain European future. But with new technological developments, decades often elapse between the conception of a new idea and the production of goods on a commercial basis. We have only to consider that the next generation may live in a radically different way from ourselves because of what we have decided today, to realize that thirty years is not such a long time after all.

In some sectors such as energy, transport and the labour market, the Commission already forecasts short- and medium-term trends. The picture becomes blurred only when it has to show aspects covering more than one sector and long-term prospects, and this is where the Commission needs scientific advice.

It is, of course, questionable whether science can today provide all the data and instruments needed to ensure that these forecasts for decades ahead prove in practice as beneficial as can so easily be proved in theory. Such forecasts could, for example, act as an early warning system for political planning: they could warn of economic or social strains and imbalances and identify areas of new potential. Regularly updated basic data could be stored in computer centres to which Community and Member States would have constant access. Lord Kennet's team of experts has been busy up to the middle of this year exploring exactly what scientific and technological forecasting techniques can achieve. The preliminary study, therefore, does not itself contain any forecasts about the next thirty years. What it does do is describe, in very general terms, the purposes, the possibilities and the limits of the planned "Europe plus 30" project. The Commission wants the experts to come up with answers to the following questions:

- (i) What forecasting resources already exist in Europe and to what extent could they be profitably tapped for the purposes of the Community?
- (ii) What methods are available and which ones are to be preferred? Here, the experts will have to weigh up the relative merits of such differing techniques as the - if anything - intuitive "Delphic method" and computer intensive "mathematical modelling".
- (iii) For what sectors should the Community make forecasts and how could it link them up into a coherent whole? However important foreseeable developments in the fields of, say, industry, communications, health, education or resources may be, their interdependence and reciprocal influence are at least of equal significance.
- (iv) How should the future project be organized and how should it be carried out? This question covers everything from suggestions as to the composition of the future research team, to details of the likely costs.

It is on the basis of the answers which they get to these questions that the Commission and the Council will decide if the project "Europe plus 30" should be continued beyond the preliminary phase which is now ending. One does not have to be a prophet to be able to predict what Lord Kennet's group of experts will be recommending to the Community: an unequivocal yes to the carrying out of the forecasting study, for in Europe there is still an obvious lack of comprehensive ideas about the future.