

Week of 23 to 28 February

RESEARCH: Are we making the best use of knowledge?

- The problem of transfer and exploitation of scientific knowledge and technology has rarely been studied by itself. The fundamental question on this subject is whether or not the results of research efforts commissioned by public authorities are channelled to those who are the best placed to ensure they are used effectively in industry? It is all too probable that a number of results remain unused, and that the transfer process could be improved, especially by developing the role of intermediaries. The European Community Commission is planning a conference on this important subject June 10 to 12 in Luxembourg.

To obtain the results of this conference, or to participate, inquiries should be addressed to J.M. Gibb, European Community Commission, DG XIII, BP 1907, Luxembourg.

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CONSUMERS: A step closer to control of hormones in meat

Europe has come one step closer to the objective of a massive and spontaneous consumer campaign aiming at protection against the abuse of hormones and other potentially harmful products in producing meats for the public.

The campaign was triggered in October of last year following the revelations that veal and other meats were being artificially treated with hormones which have been proven to be harmful. The result was a widespread consumer boycott of meats in certain European countries and a promise by the European Community's Council of Ministers to adopt legislation that would end this dangerous practice in all the member states of the Community.

The problem to be handled revolved around the fact that although national laws existed in several member countries against the use of such products to artificially fatten animals destined for human consumption, many unscrupulous producers were nevertheless continuing this practice and endangering the health of the final consumer. What was needed, therefore, was a measure that would close the loopholes at the European level.

In relatively rapid order, following the decision in principle by the Council of Ministers, experts at the European Commission in Brussels drafted a new law that would create a system of inspection and regulation against the use of such products except for therapeutic purposes.

One major step in the Community legislative process took place recently when the European Parliament gave its favourable opinion on the Commission proposal. Following a debate on the subject during which opponents of the measure claimed that such a move represented the capitulation of Community institutions to emotionalism and panic that would in the end increase the cost to the consumer, the Parliament rejected several amendments designed to water down the proposal and approved a resolution in favour of its adoption by a vote of 117 for, 1 against and 7 abstentions.

Following the vote, the European Bureau of Consumer Unions, the leading organisation representing consumer interests at the Community level, said that there was now no further obstacle to immediate adoption of the legislation by the Council of Ministers. It added that there was even new and dramatic proof of the need for such a measure in the fact that recently hormones had been found in cattle imported from Belgium to Holland showing that producers were still not respecting their own laws even in the face of the stricter Community legislation under preparation.

In view of the previous Council of Ministers' decision in principle in favour of such a measure, relief for Europe's consumers should be expected in the foreseeable future.

ENERGY : The hard road to energy independence

As motorists throughout Europe are obviously aware, the latest unexpected round of oil price increases came recently not from a high-level meeting of oil-producing countries but as a result of the dramatic rise in the value of the US Dollar, in which most oil deals are conducted.

This new increase is a blow not only for motorists and other citizens, but also for industries and governments which suddenly find they have to pay billions more in their own currencies for their imported oil. This recent upheaval is but one of the examples of the difficulties experienced in most countries along the way to coping with the new era of scarcer energy. Others abound in various sectors. In fact, the new increase in the cost of oil may actually hasten the way to development of other energy sources as they become even more competitive with oil.

Attempts by European countries to rationalise their energy production and consumption and the difficulties they have encountered are well catalogued in a recent study prepared by the European Commission in Brussels. The aim of the study is to evaluate the progress realised to date in the 10 member countries following the approval by the Council of Ministers in May of 1980 on a broad set of energy policy goals for the coming decade. The Council action affirmed the need for greater energy savings and a reduction in oil imports and laid down guidelines for an assessment by the Commission of Member States' programmes to determine to what extent they meet the Community's agreed objectives.

The first such evaluation has been conducted and already the experts see the possibility of some problems in meeting the objectives set for 1990. First of all changing economic conditions make it extremely hard to make solid predictions, the report states. But it notes some slippage in the ambitious programmes for development of coal and nuclear energy aimed at reaching a point where they provide from 70 to 75 percent of the Community's electricity and decrease oil consumption to about 40 percent of total energy. Financial problems and public concern about nuclear energy may be causing a slowdown in expansion in that sector that could involve consumption of some 50 million tonnes of oil above that planned for 1990 and set the oil share of total use at about 43 percent instead of the 40 percent targeted. The report also puts in greater perspective the possible role of alternative energy sources, such as solar, wind or tidal power. Even though progress is being realised in these fields, it anticipates that renewable energy sources will account for only about 2.2 percent of total energy. It also calls for greater efforts at coordinating prices to improve the possibility of achieving these goals for the next decade.

PARLIAMENT: The price of curiosity

Just as all national Parliamentarians have the right to put their governments on the grill, European Parliamentarians also have the privilege of asking oral or written questions to European Community institutions such as the Commission and the Council of Ministers.

And it can hardly be said that they don't take advantage of this right. Between July 1979 and July 1980, or during the first year of the current term, the then 410 members of the European Parliament asked a total of 2,299 questions to the Commission.

It's easy to imagine the work involved in processing and researching the answers requested. In the European Commission Secretariat, a unit of 17 persons is devoted exclusively to the handling of the written questions and their answers. To this unit must be added some 30 officials charged with the coordination of answers within the various services and departments of the Commission, as well as the personnel in charge of translating all the answers, the typing and other related functions. Lastly, there are also other officials who draft the replies, the attorneys who verify them and Parliamentary aides of each of the 14 Commissioners, whose time spent on these written questions is difficult to quantify.

The average time which elapses before an answer is given is currently between 45 and 50 days, largely because of the requirements that the answer be furnished in all the Community languages.

From all this, it naturally follows that a reply to a written question costs a sizeable sum of money just in personnel costs. In April 1980, it was estimated that the average cost was about £ 450, but some more complex questions cost as much as £ 670.

Curiosity should not be considered a vice of the Parliamentarians, but it does represent a considerable cost.

ADMINISTRATION: Europe's bureaucracy in question

The year 1984 is clearly within sight and the date set by George Orwell has an ominous ring to it. The society described by the famous author was a sort of immense bureaucracy where everyone, as only a small cog in a gigantic machinery, was completely at the service of the state. The current situation is luckily far from being as apocalyptic and when the subject of bureaucracies is brought up in Europe, most eyes are cast towards Eastern Europe. Nevertheless, it is sometimes useful to take a closer look at figures indicating the actual share of the population working in the service of national administrations.

Naturally, this percentage varies widely depending on the country in the

European Community -from Ireland, where about 2 percent of the total population is in public service, to a maximum of 3.7 percent in Germany. All told, national administrations employ 2.9 percent of the total population of the nine Community countries, prior to the entry of Greece earlier this year, or 7.5 million civil servants.

This involves only general administration and does not include teaching, health, postal and transportation personnel. Compared to these administrative staffs, the European Community, which is sometimes described as a vast bureaucracy, employs a relatively limited number of persons. About 16,000 European officials are spread between six different institutions. The European Commission is the largest with more than 11,000 persons, of which more than 1,200 are interpreters and translators. Given the broad diversity and the scope of the tasks assigned to the Community, these institutions have relatively modest staffs. Only 6 Europeans in every 100,000 are in the service of the Community, a number that few national administrations can match.

SOCIETY: Young people and Europe

The progress of European integration will depend to a large degree on the interest and understanding that will be displayed towards it in the future by the 60 million young people under 15 who currently live in the European Community. However, the first direct elections to the European Parliament in 1979 revealed a profound ignorance about the Community and its goals among a large number of young people.

Preoccupied by this lack of awareness, the new elected Parliament assigned one of its committees to draw up a report on a European Community policy on behalf of youth. This report, prepared by Mrs. Marie-Jane Pruvot (a member of the Liberal and Democratic Group) has just been published. It shows that the Community has already undertaken a number of initiatives and activities especially designed for younger Europeans, and particularly those most in need of assistance.

Some specific measures have been adopted to guarantee equality of opportunity in education, for young women, for disadvantaged children, to young handicapped persons and the children of migrant workers. The European Social Fund also finances a number of pilot projects of vocational training for these categories of young persons.

Elsewhere, the development of the European concept has been encouraged through the creation of European schools in most of the member countries and especially through an exchange programme for young workers. Mrs. Pruvot's report also urges the European Commission in Brussels to present new proposals to encourage further exchanges among all categories of young people,

from students to workers or the unemployed.

The Community is also pursuing a long-term effort on behalf of the mutual recognition of diplomas or certificates issued in the member states. This recognition is necessary for young persons to continue their studies or look for work in a Community country other than the one where they live. Also, a European Youth Forum was created in 1978, which regroups a number of youth organisations of a political, social, cultural or religious nature to represent their interests before the Community institutions and to stimulate the interests of young people in relevant issues. The Forum is consulted regularly by the European Commission before it takes a decision.

All these actions on behalf of youth are still of a limited nature because of budgetary constraints. In fact, the funds allotted for the Community's youth, cultural, educational and training activities total only about 0.4 percent of the European Community budget.

That's why the report of the European Parliament insists on a considerable increase in such funds for next year. It also suggests that the Community institutions promote an educational programme on the dangers of alcohol and drugs, whose uses are expanding at an alarming rate.

Among the other proposals contained in this report, there is also the recommendation that a "European peace corps" be created composed of young qualified volunteers who could aid developing countries to expand certain activities they would be unable to handle alone.

So that we can improve "EUROFOCUS" and the general service we try to offer to our subscribers, we should be happy to receive any comments, criticisms or suggestions. If you should use any of the copy a reference to "EUROFOCUS" (and possibly a copy of the final article) would be much appreciated.

AGRICULTURE: The strategy for the coming season

Traditionally, one of the most animated European debates of each year is the one over the setting of agricultural prices. It is always one involving difficult choices. It means that the Agriculture Ministers of the ten European Community member countries must determine the common prices that will be guaranteed to their farmers for their products. These prices should not be confused with consumer prices, which are not standard throughout the Community. The proposals just presented by the European Commission for the coming 1981/1982 harvest season foresee an increase averaging some 7.8 percent (ranging from 4 to 12 percent depending on the product). But the Commission also proposes to link this increase to a series of other measures. First, it wants to generalize the principle of financial co-responsibility for the agricultural producers. That means they would participate in the costs resulting from surplus production that the Community is forced to support because of its system of guaranteed prices. To the Commission, this co-responsibility is the best way of avoiding an unlimited swelling of agricultural expenditures, which absorb already some three-quarters of the entire Community budget. If the supplies on the market remain in balance, it would have no effect on the farmer.

In addition, the Commission believes it appropriate to reduce the positive monetary compensatory levies in Germany and the United Kingdom and to eliminate all of those in effect in the Benelux countries. These levies act as subsidies for exports and imports of agricultural products from and to countries with strong currencies and run counter to the Community principle of a united market.

During the first discussions by the ten Agriculture Ministers, it seemed apparent that most felt the price increase proposed by the Commission to be insufficient. The Commission argues that its proposals seek to strike a balance between the market conditions, the need to maintain the revenues of farmers and the Community budget requirements, as well as between the functioning of the agricultural industry and the general economy.

Elsewhere, the Commission estimates that the increase proposed would only cause a rise of 2.5 percent in consumer prices for food. This, however, is not the opinion of consumer organisations which have called the price rises too high. On the other hand, the farm groups say the increases are obviously insufficient and also reject the other Commission proposals.

The Farm Ministers in the coming weeks will have to keep a cool head to try as best as they can to narrow the gap between these different interests and reach a compromise.