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ADULTERATED WINE: Shortly, a special police?

Last year it was anti-freeze; this year it is methanol. It is becoming difficult to open a bottle of wine without getting cold feet. Early this year the European Commission thought the answer to the wine scandal was a special European police force, and recent events in Italy have only confirmed it in its belief.

Wines laced with methanol have resulted in several deaths in Italy in recent weeks. During a meeting on April 8 of officials from the 12 member states the Italians sought to reassure the others. They pointed out that since March 28 no Italian table or quality wine can be exported without a special certificate from an official laboratory certifying that it does not contain excessive quantities of methanol.

As soon as the scandal broke in Italy, the authorities there notified the European Commission of the kinds of wine involved and their brand names. The Commission at once passed on this information to the other member states.

But this clearly is not enough. The European Commission has a department dealing with fraud, and the Italian authorities have announced they will cooperate with it over the adulterated wine. But the Commission would like to see tighter controls on wine produced or sold in the Community. It is therefore proposing that each member state set up a special department, to be manned by national as well as European officials.

WATER: Liable to VAT

Domestic water supplies are subject to VAT nearly everywhere in the European Community, at rates varying from 0 to 22%, the European Commission has told the Belgian Euro-MP, François Roelants du Vivier. A Green, Mr du Vivier wants to discourage households from wasting water by taxing them.

The Irishman and Luxembourger knows that he is paying only for the water; neither country charges VAT. In the UK, water is zero-rated for VAT purposes. But elsewhere the water bill is increased by VAT - which is low in the Netherlands (5%) but rises progressively - 6% in Belgium, 7% in France and Germany, 9% in Italy - before it jumps to 22% in Denmark.

TECHNOLOGY: Chips with arsenic

It's not only arsenic and old lace which go together. Mixed with another chemical substance, gallium, arsenic has made possible a new European electronic chip, one of the first concrete results of the European Strategic Programme for Research and Development in Information Technology, better known by its acronym, ESPRIT.

The news was given by the European Research Commissioner, Karl-Heinz Narjes, on April 8, following the latest meeting of the Research Ministers of the 12-nation European Community. He described the new chip as the outcome of collaboration between a number of European semi-conductor manufacturers: LEP and Thomson-CSF (France); Plessey (UK) and Siemens (Germany).

The new chip should be very successful in competition with the common or garden silicon variety, on which the fortunes of Silicon Valley were built. It has two major advantages: it uses less power and is much faster. Its makers hope to market it soon in a new generation of advanced components.

Another ESPRIT project, with the forbidding name HEROD, has made it possible to set the first European standards in the field of multi-media message handling. The new standards, which cover Office Document Architecture and Office Document Interchange Format, are of direct application to future information systems in business and administration. An editor for guiding the users is also provided. The standards are the result of cooperation between industry and French, German, Italian and British universities.

ESPRIT has also given birth to a silicon compiler, a complex software programme which automatically converts technical specifications for digital signal processing chips into an operational chip. Conceived by IMEC, a small firm set up by Belgium's Leuven University, the new programme is four times faster than previously known methods.

Launched in 1984, the ESPRIT programme consists of two stages, each of five years. It has given good results so far, and on April 8 the Research Ministers asked the European Commission to ensure that it continues to provide an effective response to the challenges facing Europe in the field of information technology. The Commission, which will shortly be presenting proposals covering the second stage, hopes to strengthen and expand it.

REGIONAL FUND: The year's second allocation goes to the Iberian peninsula

The second allocation of grants from the European Community's Regional Fund is strongly Iberian in flavour, like the first. The 106 million ECU* which the European Commission has just approved will go to finance some 364 individual investment projects in the poorer parts of Spain and Portugal.

Spain is to receive 58 million ECU, nearly all of which will be spent in improving the economic infrastructure of the Canary Islands and the Andalusian and Castilian regions. Some 15 million ECU will be used to improve security at the airports of Seville, Las Palmas and Teneriffe, heavily frequented by tourists. Another 2 million ECU will be devoted to industrial investments and should help create or save over 400 jobs.

Portugal's share is 48 million ECU. All of it will be spent on infrastructure projects, over half of it in improving water supplies in the country's poorest regions.

Since joining the Community on January 1, Spain and Portugal will have received 250 million ECU and 300 million ECU respectively from the Regional Fund. It has been possible to make allocations so soon after their entry because they applied last year - and the European Commission normally processes applications very quickly.

* 1 ECU = UK£ 0.62 or IR£ 0.71.

BULL FIGHTING: Community powerless to help the bulls, Euro-MP told

The European Community's directive requiring animals to be slaughtered humanely does not apply to the bull ring, Britain's Euro-MP, Richard Cottrell, has been told by the European Commission.

Like several other Euro-MPs, mostly British, Mr Cottrell doubts whether the rules governing corridas, especially in Spain, conform to the Community's regulations on animal protection. The fact is a 1974 European Council directive requires animals destined for slaughter to be first stunned. But matadors, the Commission has pointed out, are not in the business of slaughtering bulls.

DISABLED PEOPLE: Community news and information in Braille

Jeanne-Françoise Crahay is blind. From her office in the European Commission's headquarters she helps run "Braille Europe" and "Cassette Europe", two of the Commission's services for blind people in the 12-nation European Community.

Braille Europe makes Community news available in all nine official languages. The texts are prepared in Braille by the Commission's Bureau for Action in Favour of Disabled People, in cooperation with Belgium's national institute for the blind, and sent to all similar institutions in the Community.

Longer documents are recorded in all Community languages by officials who have volunteered for the task. Recordings are made in the studios of the Braille League and copies sent all over the EC by Cassette Europe. The latest text to be recorded is the draft Council recommendations and model code on the employment of disabled people.

Miss Crahay is one of the three Commission officials who will benefit from a new pilot project to develop computer work stations for the Commission's blind officials.

DRIVING LICENCES: Commission points out that translations are unnecessary

With its nine official languages the 12-nation European Community remains a mini Tower of Babel. Excessive zeal by customs officials, for example, can result in not only frayed tempers but also a hole in the vacation budget.

The German Euro-MP, Karl von Wogau, drew the European Commission's attention to the misfortunes of a driver who drew up at an Italian customs post. He had a valid German driving licence but was fined 12,000 lira* because he could not produce an Italian translation of it.

Thanks to the Commission's intervention, the fine was reimbursed. What is more, the Italian authorities have agreed it should never have been imposed.

In the Commission's view, the mutual recognition of national driving licences by the member states does not permit officials to ask for a translation. Happily, the new Community driving licence, introduced on January 1, is clearly emblazoned as such in all Community languages. Even monolingual officials cannot mistake it for anything else.

* approximately UK£ 5 or IRL 5.65.

WORKER COOPERATIVES: Commission finds they generate local employment

Worker cooperatives are here to stay. By 1984 their number had risen to 16,000, an increase of 150% over a brief, 6-year period. This new upsurge in their numbers is seen by the European Commission as part of the phenomenon of local employment initiatives evident throughout the European Community. But worker cooperatives require favourable legislation and supportive institutions providing the full range of services needed by new entrants if they are to become even a relatively important part of the economic landscape.

The Commission, which was replying to a question from a British Euro-MP, Terence Pitt, noted that in 1983 it sent the member states a paper on Community action to combat unemployment, in which it drew attention both to the role of worker cooperatives and their specific problems. These include legal problems facing those wanting to set up such cooperatives and the related problem of finding the necessary finance.

In mid-1984 the EC Council of Ministers invited member states to see how far their national legislations facilitated the creation of cooperatives and offered legal and financial provisions as would encourage their creation. Since then the Commission has tried to ensure that more systematic use is made of Community funds to promote local employment initiatives, including worker cooperatives.

The Commission also cooperates with the Brussels-based European Committee of Workers Cooperatives (CECOP), which groups 18 member organizations, representing a large part of worker cooperatives in the Community. The Commission consulted CECOP before drawing up its paper on combatting unemployment through local employment initiatives.

The Commission has also helped CECOP and other agencies organize seminars, including one in Italy last September on the experience and role of bodies promoting worker cooperatives. At present it is looking into the possibility of new financing arrangements for local employment initiatives, including worker cooperatives. They range from the provision of guarantees and subsidized interest rates to core funding for intermediary agencies.

Worker cooperatives are concentrated in three Community member states. Italy leads, with some 14,000 cooperatives, employing 430,000 persons. France has 1,200, employing 36,000 persons and the U.K. roughly 670 cooperatives with a workforce of some 7,500 in all.

AFRICA: Commission outlines program for black Africa's economic recovery

Africa, especially black Africa with its 400 million inhabitants, cannot solve its problems unaided. It urgently needs help in dealing with problems of insufficient food production, falling export earnings and declining foreign aid and investment - not to mention a rapidly rising population and soil erosion, which is turning the land into desert.

The European Commission believes that the 12-nation European Community is best placed to take the lead in a programme aimed at putting the countries south of the Sahara in particular back on their feet. The Community, after all, has always been active in the North-South Dialogue and is linked through formal trade and aid agreements, notably the Lome Convention, to virtually every African nation.

The Commission has now outlined to the member states a global recovery programme. Its aim: to encourage them to adopt a common position in time for the forthcoming international conferences on Africa, the most important of which will be the Special Session of the UN General Assembly.

At the heart of the crisis, the Commission believes, is a failure to raise production. Hence the need to step up efforts in such immediately productive sectors of the economy as agriculture, animal husbandry, fishing and mining. Once these have been firmly established, the emphasis will have to shift to industrialization, with priority being given to meeting the needs of Africans themselves.

The success of any programme to resolve Africa's problems depends, as the Commission points out, on the ability of all the countries concerned to reform not only their economies but also their bureaucracies. But the international community can help, notably by stabilizing raw material prices, and eventually exporting earnings, and giving more financial aid.

The Commission takes the view that an external debt is an unavoidable element in economic development. If the present debt crisis is to be overcome, donor countries will have to increase the volume both of their bilateral aid and of the soft loans extended by agencies such as the World Bank's International Development Association. In the case of the poorest countries it will be necessary to transform government-to-government loans into outright gifts, as was done some eight years ago under international auspices.

The Commission also wants increased coordination between donor and beneficiary countries, with the former resisting the temptation to finance prestige projects which are commercially attractive.

ENERGY: No more Community oil and gas in 15 to 20 years

Falling oil prices are a good/bad thing for the European Community. They're a bit of both, of course. In the short run the savings on oil imports should give a boost to the economies of the 12-nation Community. But in the longer term lower oil prices could mean a return to the EC's earlier dependence on imports - unless the member states push ahead with their programmes to (1) save energy and (2) diversify their energy mix.

But the Community probably has only another 15 to 20 years in which to carry these programmes through to a successful conclusion. The fact is that if the EC continues to pump oil out of the ground at the same rate as in 1984 - when Community production reached 140 million tonnes - it will have exhausted its own reserves by the year 2000, according to the European Commission.

The picture is only slightly brighter for natural gas. The Community has enough reserves for another 21 years. The picture is brightest as regards coal: the Community's estimated reserves would last well into the 26th century, even at 1984 production levels.

But it is not only Europe which is threatened with the early exhaustion of its oil and gas wells. The United States is worse off. Its oil wells will have dried up by 1993 and its gas wells by 1998 at present rates of extraction. The Soviet Union would run out of domestic oil by the end of the century, but it has enough natural gas to see it through the year 2050.

OPEC could come into its own again in another 10 years. Saudi Arabia's estimated oil reserves would last another 100 years, those of Iran over 60 years. As for natural gas, the Middle East could continue to pump its gas fields for another 500 years.

The first oil shock taught the EC how to do with less imported oil. Between 1975 and 1984 oil imports fell by 43%. But domestic production made up much of the difference - it rose from 11 million tonnes to some 140 million tonnes in 1984. The situation is the reverse for natural gas. Community production met 94% of Community needs in 1975 but only 67% in 1984.

It is always risky to extrapolate. But even allowing for fresh discoveries of oil and gas within the 12-nation EC, it is clear that the Community must diversify its energy mix. Given its very substantial coal reserves, the cheaper, more effective utilization of these reserves is one obvious solution. Another is nuclear energy. Energy from renewable resources - sun, wind and biomass - is yet another.

HEALTH: Mother's milk gets priority

Although such dangerous chemical substances as PCBs, dioxins and furans have been detected in the milk of some mothers, the European Commission believes that breast-feeding must continue to be encouraged. It reached this conclusion, which is set out in a report to the governments of the 12 member states of the European Community, on the basis of experts' reports.

The experts have shown that certain chemical substances can accumulate in body tissues for 10, 20 and 30 years, and can be passed on to babies through breast-feeding. But the quantities detected are too small, in their view, to endanger the health of infants.

The Commission recognizes that measuring techniques must be improved but believes a systematic analysis of mother's milk to be unnecessary in the Community. The Commission has stressed, on several occasions since 1981, the importance of breast-feeding. At the same time the Commission, the EC Council and Euro-MPs have all been trying, but without success so far, to regulate the manufacture and sale of "industrial" substitutes for mother's milk, so that they can be used in perfect safety. The Commission must shortly make proposals to the Twelve on this subject.

CARS: Lights unnecessary in daylight hours

In Sweden and Finland motorists must turn their lights on during the daytime as well. But the European Commission has no intention of making a proposal along these lines to the 12 member states of the European Community, as a contribution to the European Road Safety Year. In its reply to a German Euro-MP, Horst Seefeld, the Commission has pointed to the differences between the Scandinavian countries and much of the Community as regards climate and the number of hours of daylight.

Motorcycles are another matter, however. Most European countries, including the EC countries, require lights to be used in the broadest daylight also, following a recommendation of the European Conference of Transport Ministers, which groups all the countries of the European continent.