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The opening of borders inside the Common Market has unfortunately not been sufficient to eliminate the numerous administrative formalities which the drivers of heavyweight lorries are subjected to, as our imaginary conversation between one and a customs officer proves.

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ENERGY : Coal slips a bit

A return to coal has often been offered as a possible solution to current energy problems. Through this, Europe could regain a degree of energy independence since the United Kingdom and the Federal Republic of Germany both possess considerable coal reserves. The European Commission in Brussels has been an advocate of the increased use of coal. In a report published in 1980, it forecast that the 10 European Community members would double their coal consumption before the end of the century.

In fact, these predictions have been cast into doubt by the most recent figures on coal consumption in Europe. They reveal that demand for coal in the Community was lower during the first half of 1981 than during the corresponding 1980 period. In a recent communication re-emphasising its reason for optimism, the European Commission offered a number of explanations for this slowdown. First, the persistent weakness of economic activity has provoked a reduction in the use of electricity, especially that based on coal. In addition, the substitution of coal for other energies in industries and urban heating has progressed more slowly than expected. Finally, individuals have for the most part reduced their heating fuel consumption to compensate for price increases.

Also, on the production side, the tendency has been toward a decline of less than 1 percent between the first half of 1980 and in 1981. During the first six months of this year, coal production in the Community totalled 125.4 million tonnes and for the year it might reach 243 million tonnes, about 4 million less than in 1980.

As far as imports from third countries are concerned, they amounted to about 36 million tonnes between January and June 1981, or about the same level as last year. Our principal suppliers were, in order of importance, the United States, South Africa, Poland and Australia.

Etienne Davignon, the European Commissioner concerned with energy matters, has announced a series of proposals on coal policy for next February. The aim of these measures is to better integrate coal policy into a total energy strategy that also includes aspects as different as research (notably into the liquefaction and gasification of coal), infrastructure and production.

COMPETITION : Fair play is even for the biggest

The marketplace has sometimes been described as dominated by a sort of jungle warfare where only the biggest and most aggressive survive, but there are laws designed to keep the strongest in line and protect the consumer as well as the more modest competitor.

The impression persists, nevertheless, that the bigger the power of a company is, the more likely it is to get away undisturbed by authorities trying to enforce the laws of fair play.

It may be a difficult struggle, but dedicated public servants at both the national and the European level are trying to enforce these laws and also resort to the weapons at their disposal to impose the required discipline. Most countries and the European Community have competition and antitrust rules prohibiting practices that restrict freedom of trade, the choice of consumers or that exploit a strong corporate position in the market.

When companies try to abuse the relative freedom of the marketplace by transgressing these laws, authorities try to bring them back in line. That's what happened recently, when European authorities cracked down once again on a company it felt had gone too far. This time, it was one of the biggest European tyre companies, Michelin, whose Dutch subsidiary was thought to have abused its 60 per cent hold on the Dutch market for replacement heavy-duty tyres to reduce competition, trade and consumer choice. It did this through a practice, which the authorities had previously attacked in other cases, of rewarding loyal dealers who sold only Michelin tyres with generous discounts. While that seems fair enough up to a point, it can eliminate competitors and leave a dominant firm free to force prices upwards to the detriment of the consumer. That's why the European Commission, which is charged with enforcing the rules, fined the firm which then ended the practice.

It wasn't the first time the European Commission competition enforcers had used their power in this way. Sometimes, it has been against the big European firms, sometimes against giant multinational corporations and at other times, smaller organisations that nevertheless tried to abuse a situation. The Commission has tried to adjust the size of the fine to the seriousness of the offence and also make it onerous enough to act as a deterrent for the firm or other firms. That's why in this case, the fine amounted to £ 385,000 and in others it has gone as high as £ 800,000.

The authorities also go after other cases of price-fixing, market-sharing or trade restriction by one or a combination of firms. And they have promised to maintain this vigilance as the best method of assuring a healthy competition and economy during a difficult crisis period.

AGRICULTURE : Help on the way for Mediterranean products

Wine, olive oil and citrus fruits such as lemons, oranges and others are welcome products that not only taste good but also conjure up images of the Mediterranean sunshine. Contrary to animal products, such as meat or dairy goods, which comprise the bulk of the agricultural output of Northern Europe, vegetable or fruit-based products, including wine, olive oil and fruits, are more typically Mediterranean.

For a long time, France and Italy were the only major producers of such products in the European Community. But European agriculture is rapidly changing following the entry of Greece into the Common Market earlier this year and with the anticipation of the membership of Spain and Portugal.

The Community's agricultural industry, which is plagued by surplus production and spiralling costs in some sectors, will have to adapt to the realities of the new membership or else face even more troublesome consequences. That's why the European Commission in Brussels has just sent a series of proposals to the Council of Ministers aimed at modifying the organisation of the market for so-called Mediterranean products.

Concerning wine, for instance, the Commission proposed recourse to obligatory preventive distillation in the case of overproduction. Already, the European Community countries produce annually 7 million hectolitres more than is consumed and the entry of Spain will aggravate this situation.

Other measures are foreseen that would limit the planting of vineyards, the improvement of yields and the increasing of the minimum alcohol level.

These would be accompanied by effective inspection and control methods.

For olive oil, the Commission has developed an over-all strategy aimed both at safeguarding the income of producers and at maintaining a balance between supply and demand on the Community market. The Commission would also like to limit budgetary expenses and to take into account the interests of other countries that produce other types of vegetable oils.

Finally, in the area of fruit and vegetables, it proposes to encourage producers' organisations by helping them more effectively. These groups generally seek to concentrate the supply of their products and to stabilise prices, as well as providing their members with technical support for packaging and marketing. There, the Commission also hopes to strengthen the controls on application of quality standards. These supplemental measures will undoubtedly be adopted as part of the general revision of the common agricultural policy currently underway.

EDUCATION : There's no place like home for studying

Despite the popularity of international tourism, open frontiers and the best efforts of many institutions, only one in 200 students in the European Community currently continue their higher education in schools in Community countries other than their own.

This fact is one of many contained in the latest edition of a handbook which in recent years has become the best-selling publication of the European Commission, the "European Community's Student Handbook". Published in all Community languages, the third edition totals 56,000, up from 50,000 in 1979 and 20,000 in 1977, reflecting increased demand.

The handbook is full of useful information about the courses, requirements, fees, procedures, grants and accommodation facilities of higher educational institutions in the European Community. Its aim, of course, is to increase the mobility and interaction of the student and academic population in the Community countries. Despite the popularity of the book as a reference tool, however, relatively few students still venture beyond the familiar confines of their own country to study in other Community countries.

The handbook is only one of the European Community's efforts to encourage educational mobility and expansion. The European Commission also just recently announced the latest series of financial grants awarded for joint programmes of studies in Community institutions. A total of 90 such programmes received grants for the 1981/82 academic year, bringing the total of grants since the programme was introduced five years ago as part of the Community education activities to 374. The grants, totalling around £ 148,000 (250,000 ECU), include institutions in all 10 Community Member States.

Disciplines covered by the joint studies programmes are varied and include languages, politics, economics, urban studies, natural sciences and engineering. The 374 were selected from among 811 applications received. Institutions in the United Kingdom, the Federal Republic of Germany and France have been the most active in obtaining grants for such study programmes with over 100 each while the other countries have trailed considerably behind.

The most popular subjects covered in these joint study programmes, which combine facilities and personnel in more than one Community country, have been politics, social studies, economics, language and literature.

AGRICULTURE: A sugar mountain to help the Third World

Third World farmers were recently delighted by a European Commission decision to stockpile 2 million tonnes of sugar from this year's bumper EEC crop in order to boost world prices.

An extra lump of sugar in our tea means very little to us, unless we are dieting. To the developing world it can mean the difference between life and death. Their livelihood depends on a commodity whose price fluctuates wildly year by year. In 1974, for example, sugar fetched more than six times the price paid in 1978. Bad weather and a poor harvest can make prices soar, but with a bumper crop they plummet, along with the farmers' income.

Some protection is afforded Third World growers under the International Sugar Agreement, which tries to stabilise prices by rationing how much sugar goes onto the world market at times of oversupply. It imposes export quotas on producers and stockpiles surpluses. But one of the main reasons for its failure to control prices sufficiently has been the fact that the European Community, the biggest sugar-producing group of countries, is not a member. This year, European growers are expected to produce a record crop of more than 14 million tonnes. Add to that another 1.3 million tonnes that the Community guarantees to buy from "associated" Third World countries and you have over 15 million tonnes of sugar. Since we consume less than 10 million tonnes ourselves, the rest, more than 5 million tonnes, has to either be exported and sold on the world market at heavily subsidised prices, or stored.

The sheer size of this year's surplus persuaded European Commission officials to hold back 2 million tonnes from the world market and thus artificially push up world prices. These were already desperately low, in anticipation of a bumper European crop flooding the market, and the Community was facing a barrage of criticism from other producing countries, notably Australia. The decision, which was greeted with surprise and delight, particularly in the Third World, encourages speculation that Europe may soon consider joining the International Sugar Agreement. The United Kingdom and the Netherlands, with the support of the European Commission, expressed an interest in joining at a recent meeting of Community Foreign Ministers in Brussels. But France, the leading European sugar producer, is understandably concerned that membership will mean an export quota and a cut in production.

Supporters of the Agreement believe that, by joining, the Community could help the Third World and improve the somewhat strained relations existing between the rich and poor countries in the so-called North-South Dialogue.

IN BRIEF ... IN BRIEF ... IN BRIEF ... IN BRIEF ... IN BRIEF ...

CONSUMERS : To each his daily bread

Did you know that British-made bread can't be sold on French territory, and vice versa ? There's a good reason for this. In the United Kingdom, it is mandatory to add chalk to virtually all types of flours while in France the adding of chalk in bread is prohibited.

The European Commission has sought to eliminate such obstacles to the European Community principle of free trade between members and to adopt joint practices concerning the labelling of food products and food additives. Concerning bread, it has nevertheless withdrawn a previous proposal aimed at coordinating the national legislations on the subject, a prospect that seemed unappetising to the member Governments.

TRADE : Old wine in new bottles

There are currently all types and sizes of wine bottles being used on the market. In order to simplify the merchandising of wine among the Member States of the European Community, a directive was adopted in November 1979, looking towards an increased standardisation of the authorised size, though not the shape, in wine bottles.

In reply to a Parliamentary question on the subject, the European Commission just recently recalled that certain sizes will be prohibited and withdrawn from the market, such as the 0.68 litre and 1.25 litre bottle. As from January 1, 1989, only the following sizes will be authorised for sale : 0.10, 0.25, 0.375, 0.50, 0.75, 1, 1.5, 2, 3 and 5 litre bottles. An especially long transition period was foreseen in order to allow the European glass bottling industry to conform to these new standards without being subject to sudden outlays for machinery and for large quantities of unusable bottles.

EDUCATION : A mislabelled "EEC School"

The European Community has established on its territory a system of "European Schools" offering a joint study programme. But it has no connection with a school in the Belgian port of Antwerp known as the "EEC School". This institution is actually a branch of the "European University", a non-profit institution linked to an American university, but its name implies a connection with Community institutions, which is misleading and unlawful. The European Commission has now asked its legal service to examine the subject and to undertake legal action if required.

CUSTOMS : Red tape traps a trucker ...

Heavy trucks thundering through the night, tachographs humming on the dashboards, coffee in greasy-spoon joints and back on the road to beat the delivery time. Trucking legends of high speed runs, immortalised in song may not, however, be strictly accurate when it comes to rolling across Europe. Trade between the countries of the European Community still involves huge amounts of administrative paperwork, despite the customs union, and despite attempts to reduce it. For truck drivers who deal with the problem at frontier posts every day, it's no joke ...

When a customs officer asks the trucker for his papers, with a flourish, he is likely to produce his export declaration, invoices, transport documents and import declaration.

"Humph", says the customs man, "what about your undertaking by the guarantor and your customs seal certificate ?"

"I thought the whole point of Europe being a customs union was to cut back on all these papers", grumbles the trucker. "I don't need this many to take a load outside the EEC."

"Well, there are a lot of regulations that apply to trade inside the Community that don't apply to countries who are not lucky enough to be members. We have to be careful, you know. After all, we're all Europeans," says the official defensively.

"But I have to carry a filing cabinet around with me in my cab," whines the trucker. "I can't sleep at night for worrying about having a photocopied invoice instead of an original."

"Well that's not my fault, I only work here," says the customs man in a hurt tone. "Have you thought of getting your boss to fit out an office for you in the back of the truck ?"

"I already did, but he says that he believes in European integration and breaking down barriers to trade inside the Community. Besides, he says he can't afford the word processor I asked for."

"That's too bad," says the official sympathetically. "Now I want to see your T2 Transit document and ..." he pauses for effect, "your transit advice note." Sweating, the trucker rifles his filing cabinet ...

But things could be changing in the truckers nightmare world of papers. EEC Commissioner Karl-Heinz Narjes believes that a new initiative just launched, aimed at simplifying customs and tax procedures, will dramatically cut red-tape for people moving goods across Europe. Community officials agree that scrapping some barriers is necessary to strengthen and develop internal European markets.