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Chris Sherwell reviews some of the problems in producing an EEC environment policy

THE achievements of international organisations are, in large measure, a political trade-off between what is theoretically desirable and what is practically possible. Unsurprisingly, the balance is usually in favour of the latter. In spite of, and perhaps because of their unique but complicating commitment to political and economic union, the nine member countries of the European Community (EEC) display the attribute more than most organisations. Nowhere is this more amply demonstrated than in environment policy.

The EEC's very involvement in the field is under challenge. When the European Commission last year produced its Second Action Programme on the Environment, covering the years 1977 to 1981, one of the most powerful of the environmental lobbies, the European Environmental Bureau (EEB), representing some 38 organisations throughout the Nine, weighed in with a powerful critique. There was a contradiction, it contended, between the main goal of the EEC, which was continuous and balanced economic expansion, and the basic principle of ecology, which was a dynamic equilibrium.

In fact the EEB displays all the signs of being pleased with the EEC involvement in environmental matters. The second action programme, after all, reads much like an environmentalist's manifesto, so breathtaking is its broad sweep. The EEB's reservations concern the precise character of that involvement. It criticises, perhaps with some justification given the programme's breadth, the curious lack of attention given to transport, population growth, regional policy and national programmes. This sort of gap, it is intimated, begs its own questions and reinforces the contradictions.

Questions are indeed necessary.

Environmental issues fall under an office in the Commission with split responsibilities—the Environment and Consumer Protection Service. Its staff numbers around 30. Environmental groups would like to see greater status attached to the department, perhaps making it a Directorate General. More importantly and perhaps contradictorily, they would like to see its work better integrated in the activities of the Commission and Community as a whole.

The argument is that the EEC's involvement in the environment will be ineffective if it is limited to drawing up a programme regardless of what the various departments of the Commission are doing, as now seems to happen. The aim ought to be to promote the concept of environmental quality in all the departments, so that the work done by an environment department is not emasculated by the activities of other departments. An environment protection department, in short, ought to participate in the policy making of other departments.

In spite of this very real structural problem facing the Commission, there are people who will praise its work; they recognise the constraints, both manpower and financial, that it faces in trying to coordinate the activities of nine countries across a broad range of environmental and other matters. But its achievements in such adversity are in turn the spring of other equally penetrating criticisms of the environment policy it administers. These emphasise the need for selectivity as a paramount requirement for success. The argument is that the lack of focus, the effort to do "too much too soon" and "run before being able to walk", is a fundamental cause for disillusion.

A glance at the second action programme is certainly enough to convince

even the most ambitious lobbyist that the chances of it being legislated in fifteen years, let alone five, are at best remote. This means that the sense of priority can become blurred, and emphasises the need for greater clarity about what the Community can do and what its role can be. After all, it is not just the Commission whose institutions may need modifying to encourage a well-rounded environment policy; it is also the Council of Ministers, before which the issues may come somewhat haphazardly and which finds the greatest difficulty in dealing with them systematically and without awkward and embarrassing haggling. The point is, not all environmental matters demand a specifically European approach.

Keystone

Techniques of control

If the question of the degree to which the Community should become at all involved in environment policy seems important, it does not exhaust the list of fundamental questions on the subject which it currently faces. The very techniques of control are another issue, and form the basis for the longest running political controversy of all in this area.

Even boiled down, the essentials of the European debate are far from straightforward. The environment is recognised as having some capacity to receive pollutants. Where risks are apparent but complete prohibition is unnecessary, controls are needed. Two forms come under scrutiny, known in Europe as 'quality standards' and 'quality objectives'. Put most simply, quality objectives are pollution levels which the nine member states each undertake to do their best to attain, and quality standards are levels which the nine states each become obliged to achieve. The debate is about how precisely to use them.

Going by the political argument as it has developed thus far, the difference looks more than merely legalistic. For, having painstakingly arrived at a view of what the standards or objectives should be, the Commission is able to take steps to assist in their attainment by establishing what in its jargon are called 'norms'. This, it seems, is where the trouble starts, because it has meant the introduction of the notion of emission standards, to which Britain has strongly objected and other states and the Commission have given support.

The characteristic of emission standards causing Britain to dig its feet in is not that they are to be used, but that they are to be used uniformly. Britain has supported quality objectives on the grounds that they can take account of the varying nature of the receiving environment in a way that standards, because of their intrinsic

uniformity in the Community, cannot. To Britain, quality objectives imply emission standards but not uniform emission standards. Once it is agreed what quality a particular stretch of water, say, ought to have (which in turn depends on the use to which it is put), a quality objective must be set. To reach this, emission standards will need to be set for particular polluters on that stretch of water, but they will be peculiar to that stretch of water being used for that purpose.

Not so, say the hard-line Europeans. The imperfections of quality control mean that the only reliable path to reductions in pollution is to declare emission standards for particular classes or sections of industry and apply them uniformly throughout Europe; such standards would have to be achieved by a certain time. The British version of an emission standard, they say, is effectively a licence to pollute.

The arguments have in fact found their most coherent expression in the debate over aquatic pollution, itself just one aspect of pollution generally and a mere fragment of the environment question. Pointing to its shorter rivers, larger coastline and smaller and lower concentration of factories, Britain has argued that it can have pure water without adopting on a uniform basis the higher emission standards that would be demanded on mainland Europe. Other countries, with an eye to the Community's competition policy, have said this would give Britain an unfair competitive advantage in international trade and jeopardise a common policy both in competition and environment matters. Britain has contended that its advantage derives from possession of a natural resource and that a uniform policy would be wasteful, only harmonising costs rather than encouraging fair competition.

This dispute has occupied a considerable amount of important time. In part this is no doubt because of misunderstandings. For example, at a seminar organised in London recently on EEC environment policy, one Commission official cited the hypothetical example of two states in exactly similar circumstances trying to achieve the same air quality, in one instance by tackling only a few big companies and in the other by tackling many small companies; this, he said, would amount to an unacceptable distortion of competition. A surprised British official found that the example fitted with his own country's view of having the same environmental responsibilities in the same circumstances.

Much of the debate as it has involved aquatic pollution has necessarily involved the so-called 'black list' and 'grey list' of dangerous substances,

classified on the basis of toxicity, persistence and accumulation. Put most simply, the idea is to isolate black list substances from the environment to the point where there can be no doubt that they will harm human health, but some countries have said that black list substances should not be dumped or discharged at all. Others doubt the need for this, given the uncertainties about the substances themselves and about the absorptive capacities of the environment.

Although the fundamentals of the argument remain essentially unresolved, a breakthrough did come at a meeting of the Council of Ministers in December 1975 when a compromise solution was reached on black list substances. This embraced a dual approach allowing either emission standards on a uniform Community basis, or quality objectives which catered for different circumstances. Formally the compromise retained the notion of uniformity and allowed temporary exceptions for which Community but not uniform standards could be used: the exceptions would arise when a member state could prove that quality targets were being maintained throughout the particular area concerned, and would be re-examined every few years; the whole system would become operational within about three years, by which time priorities would be decided and actual objectives and standards set. Even then it might take five to ten years to achieve, and in light of this Britain views the application of the quality objectives as unlikely to lag much behind the implementation of emission standards.

For the grey list it was agreed that individual member states would prepare programmes which included quality objectives, from which they would derive emission standards of their own. The Commission would ensure that comparisons between countries were made to ensure some uniformity of approach, but the underlying approach became one involving quality objectives, and there is no mention of emission standards on a uniform Community basis. The recent seminar in London may anticipate an even broader acceptance of the British view.

Fears persist that the black list will in effect become a grey list. However, the detail of the breakthrough, though important, was less important than its immediate consequences. Progress could be made in April 1976 towards a Rhine convention covering pollution by salts, chemical pollution, thermal pollution and pollution by radioactivity. Agreement on limits of chemical pollution was soon reached, and a month later ministers met again to resolve

differences over salt pollution. Progress was also possible on the matter of Mediterranean pollution. In Barcelona in February 1976 16 countries finalised details of a framework convention and two protocols covering the discharge of petroleum waste and the tipping by ships and aircraft of black list and grey list pollutants into the Mediterranean.

Achievements not matched

These 'international' achievements involving Community members have not since been matched within the Community itself. At the most recent Council of Ministers meeting last December, for example, four draft directives from the Commission awaited approval: on the biological surveillance of the population for lead in the blood; on the quality of water intended for human consumption; on the waste from the titanium dioxide industry; and the reduction of water pollution by paper pulp plants. The Council adopted only the first of these.

At the end of last year, in fact, there was still around a dozen sets of proposals for directives sitting on the Council's desk awaiting action. They included proposals relating to the lead content of petrol (submitted 7 December 1973), the dumping of wastes at sea (submitted 12 January 1976), health protection standards for sulphur dioxide and suspended particulate matter in urban atmospheres (submitted 25 February 1976) and toxic and dangerous wastes (submitted 28 July 1976). Proposals for decisions awaiting adoption included one on the subject of organic micro-pollutants in water and another on exchanging information on the quality of surface fresh water in the Community.

This last item is expected to appear on the agenda, along with the other undecided items from the December meeting, when the Council of Ministers meets in June for the one and only time during Britain's present chairmanship. Outstanding items will probably also be included, and perhaps some new ones like the conservation of birds, though the chances of them being considered remain as always subject to the will of the member states on the higher

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priority items.

In its programme for 1977, published in February, the Commission says it will concentrate on four basic 'priority themes': measures to combat water pollution; evaluation of measures to prevent the deterioration of the environment; an anti-waste campaign based on a policy to encourage materials recycling; and implementation of the international conventions on the Rhine and the Mediterranean. It says it will therefore send to the Council proposals for directives on, amongst other things, protection of underground water, the quality of water for agricultural use, notification of industrial

activity involving dangerous substances (a lesson of Seveso), the discharge of various particularly harmful pollutants, and on anti-noise measures.

The Commission thus remains optimistic. Its work goes ahead under the auspices of the second action programme, which the Council meeting of last December unanimously approved, adding the undertaking that it would act on concrete proposals from the Commission within nine months of them being forwarded. That may prove to be a tall order, given the fundamental character of some of the issues still outstanding concerning the Community's environment policy. But the

Community and its policies are nothing if not resilient. And the large number of directives which have already gone through suggest that whole effort in the environmental field may have acquired a momentum.

That should allow some attack in the primary field of preventing and eliminating pollution and nuisances, where most attention has been concentrated. But managing the use of natural resources properly, controlling the ecological balance and economic growth, and generally protecting the biosphere—also aims of the EEC's second action programme—will plainly take a little longer. □

Spreading the word

David Spurgeon, recently in Asia, examines the growth of science writing there

THE business of writing about science for the mass media must have its ups and downs like any other business. Although it is difficult to judge without the evidence of a full-scale survey, it seems the trend in North America in recent years has been predominantly down. Editors no longer show the enthusiasm for science subjects that they did during the early post-Sputnik days and discussions have appeared in science writers' newsletters about the parlous state of their craft.

Some link the decline in interest to the scepticism—and in some measure, disillusionment—about the promise of science that followed the excesses of publicity associated with the US manned space programme, the development of nuclear power and 'wonder drugs' and other achievements. It seems a reasonable thesis; the earlier 'gee-whiz' phase of science writing was followed not only by a much more critical and judgmental phase, but also by the birth of various anti-science movements and by 'consumerism' and 'environmentalism'.

An interesting contrast is found in the Third World, particularly in Asia, where (again to some extent subjectively) interest in science journalism seems definitely on the upswing. Mack Laing, a Canadian science writer and professor of journalism, writing in Depthnews Science Service, a weekly newsfeature service of the Press Foundation of Asia (PFA), put it this way in a recent article from Manila:

There is a burst of activity in Asia these days toward achieving a greater public understanding of science. Some—perhaps even most—Asian nations are just waking up to the need for more public appreciation of how science and technology can help national development. Other countries

are going full blast on the idea. Leaders in these countries argue that popularising science encourages people to understand and cooperate with government actions on large-scale problems such as conservation, pollution, irrigation and flooding by man-made reservoirs, sanitation and infectious diseases. They argue that interesting the youth of a country in science increases the country's science manpower and speeds national development. One way of bringing the word about science and technology to the people is through the media of mass communications.

The Depthnews Science Service and Mr Laing's activity in it are themselves interesting results of this newly-awakened interest. PFA, a non-profit agency founded by Asian journalists some ten years ago to improve the standards of the region's media, asked Canada's International Development Research Centre (IDRC) for funds to set up a science feature service within Depthnews. Its aim would be to set the pace for the Asian press in science coverage, which in its opinion (and that of other Asians) had been deficient until then. PFA also asked for an experienced science journalist from the West to set it up and train Asians in

the techniques of science journalism.

While it is too early to judge the commercial viability of the science feature service, the initial response of the Asian media has been surprisingly good. Mr Laing has found himself in the ironic position of having to admit that the interest shown by the media in Asia for his service's articles is much greater than he could imagine Canadian editors showing for a comparable service at home.

Among his chief sources of news in the Philippines are weekly news conferences set up specifically for science writers by the University of the Philippines and the National Science Development Board. The conferences were arranged to acquaint science writers with researchers whose work is sponsored jointly by these two organisations. It seems to be succeeding. At a recent conference, about ten media representatives gathered in a small room to hear a pharmacologist talk about work she and her colleagues had been doing in identifying plants with insecticidal qualities that could serve as replacements or alternatives for chemical pesticides. (The other subject, oddly enough, was music, but apparently this was atypical, almost all subjects being scientific).

To encourage attendance, the university has adopted the practices of paying the journalists to attend the con-

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