Concerning the questions relating to the information from Valencia (regional parliament, press), the Commission does not at this stage possess enough details to express an opinion or take any measures which might be necessary. It has immediately contacted the Spanish authorities in order to obtain replies to the questions raised by the press and the regional parliament. As soon as it receives this information, it will inform the Honourable Member and provide him with its analysis of the situation.

Concerning the question on co-operation between the Commission and the Member States, Article 8 of Council Regulation (EC) No 1260/1999 (1) provides for application of the ‘principle of subsidiarity’, under which the implementation of assistance is the responsibility of the Member States at the appropriate territorial level.

The same regulation also makes provision for arrangements for Commission participation in the implementation of assistance, in particular budgetary procedures, arrangements for payments to Member States, and Commission involvement in operational programme monitoring committees. Similarly, Commission regulations have been adopted establishing rules and procedures for the implementation, management and control of assistance granted (Regulation (EC) No 438/2001 (2)) and an obligation to report irregularities and fraud to the Commission (Regulation (EC) No 1681/94 (3)).

In the specific case of the Autonomous Community of Valencia, the operational programme for the period 1994-1999 (Programa Operativo de la Comunidad Autónoma Valenciana) has not yet been wound up, as the Commission has not yet received a request for payment of the balance, the final report or the certification to be provided by the national managing authorities pursuant to Regulation (EC) No 2064/97 (4). The deadline given to the Spanish authorities to submit all the necessary documentation to the Commission is 30 June 2002.

As regards the operational programme for the period 2000-2006 (Programa Operativo Integrado de la Comunidad Autónoma Valenciana), the first meeting of the monitoring committee will take place in Valencia during June. At this meeting the Spanish authorities will have to report on implementation of the assistance. The Commission is also due to receive very soon the first annual report for the current period, describing the implementation and management of this operational programme.

Statistical projections on the ageing of Europe's population indicate that in 2050, 28% of the population will be aged over 65 compared with the present 14%. This trend, coupled with longer individual life expectancy, will entail high economic costs for the Member States.

The concept of an active role for older people has been devised in an attempt to cope with this phenomenon. It has also been proposed to put back the retirement age, since this would enable the Member States to shelve the problem for a few years and guarantee the stability of social security systems in the short term until such time as they could lay down a joint strategy.

By contrast, the European institutions are still following the practice of early retirement and do not renew the contracts of free-lance staff once they have reached age 65. Furthermore, the Commission's reform proposal speaks of the possibility (but not the need) of changing the retirement age (60) for officials and Community personnel.

Can the Commission explain the reasons for certain decisions which are casting doubt on the credibility of the European institutions?

Answer given by Mr Kinnock on behalf of the Commission

(9 July 2001)

The Commission would first like to point out that it is well aware of the phenomenon of an ageing population. The success of the Commission's European employment strategy, in particular, is crucial for the long-term future of social protection and pension systems. The Lisbon European Council set an ambitious goal: on the basis of a sustainable economic growth of three per cent of their gross domestic product (GDP), Member States should move towards an average employment rate of 70 per cent of the total workforce, and over 60 per cent of the female workforce by 2010. Clearly, this cannot be achieved if the current tendency to retire well before reaching the official retirement age is maintained. Currently, less than a quarter of people aged 60 to 64 are still in employment.

The structure of the Commission staff is well in line with these general policy objectives. The average retirement age of Commission staff is at present 62.8, with 47% of officials aged 60 to 64 still being in employment.

Concerning the officials and temporary staff of the European institutions, the normal retirement age is currently fixed at 60 years (with maximum fixed at 65 years). It is essential to regularly evaluate the balance of the Institutions' pension regime. To maintain this balance, the Staff Regulations envisage the possibility of either adapting the financial contribution to the regime, or adapting the normal retirement age, i.e. delay it in the event of a deficit in the regime. Within the framework of the Commission reform, it is proposed to maintain these two possibilities in the Staff Regulations. It is in this sense that the possibility of modifying the retirement age must be interpreted. The reform proposes, moreover, the setting up of a periodic procedure for the monitoring of this balance. Within the framework of this procedure it will be advisable to consider periodically and under the Staff Regulations the measures to be taken to maintain the balance of the regime.

Currently early retirement is provided for in the European institutions from the age of 50 with a substantially reduced pension. In addition, the official loses entitlement to social security cover from the employer. In reality, it is therefore rarely sought: on average there are less than 10 retirements per year before the age of 60 in the Commission. The proposal forwarded by the Commission to the European Parliament and the Council on 31 January 2001, to which the Honourable Member refers, does not aim to modify this 'permanent' system of early retirement. It concerns, instead, a specific measure linked to the on-going reform.

In order to address the issue of early retirement in a more structured way in future and to ease the integration of staff from new Member States, the Commission will put forward a consultative document on flexible retirement, as announced in the White Paper ‘Reforming the Commission’ of 1 March 2000 (Part II, action 34).
Regarding freelance staff, following the adoption of Council Regulation (EC, ECSC, Euratom) No 628/2000 of 20 March 2000 amending regulation (EC, Euratom, ECSC) No 259/68 laying down the Staff Regulations of Officials of the European Communities and the Conditions of Employment of Other Servants of the Communities (1), the conference interpreters engaged by the Commission are recruited, like those recruited by the Parliament, in the capacity of auxiliary staff. This new statute ensures the equal treatment of the auxiliary conference interpreters engaged by the European institutions, in the matter of, inter alia, the obligatory retirement age set down in the Staff Regulations of officials of the Communities. Consequently, neither the Commission, nor the Parliament, as European Institutions, can recruit conference interpreters of more than 65 years old, owing to Article 74 of the conditions of employment of other servants (RAA), according to which the engagement of the auxiliary agent legally comes to an end at the end of the month during which he/she reaches the age of 65.

As regards early retirement, the Commission does not apply these provisions to the conference interpreters whom it recruits.


WRITTEN QUESTION E-1204/01
by Lord Inglewood (PPE-DE) to the Commission
(19 April 2001)

Subject: Authorisation of vaccination against foot and mouth disease

When did the UK Government first formally approach the EU Standing Veterinary Committee about the possible use of vaccination against foot and mouth disease in the United Kingdom?

Answer given by Mr Byrne on behalf of the Commission
(19 June 2001)

The United Kingdom raised the issue of the possible use of vaccination against foot and mouth disease in the meeting of the Standing Veterinary Committee on 27 March 2001.

On the same day, the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food sent a fax to the Commission, requesting the examination of the circumstances under which vaccination of cattle to control foot and mouth disease might take place in the United Kingdom and the conditions that would be applied, were such vaccination to proceed.

On 28 March 2001 the Standing Veterinary Committee gave its favourable opinion to a draft Decision on this issue, which was then adopted by the Commission as Decision 2001/257/EC of 30 March 2001 laying down the conditions for the control and eradication of foot and mouth disease in the United Kingdom in application of Article 13 of Directive 85/511/EEC (2).


WRITTEN QUESTION E-1210/01
by Chris Davies (ELDR) to the Commission
(19 April 2001)

Subject: Killing of birds in Cyprus

The Commission will be aware of claims that up to 20 million birds, more than half being European migratory song birds, are being caught annually in Cyprus on lime sticks or in nets and killed in a brutal and inhumane manner.