

## NOTES

The conference was a predictable target for demonstrators from both sides. The several hundred pro-liberation protesters fared badly in the press – worse than a handful of supporters of Muzorewa and Smith ('God bless the Bishop', 'Thanks Ian for building Rhodesia').

However, what the combined investigative powers of the world press did not uncover was that – apart from a couple of people from the nuttier far right fringe – every one of the pickets had been flown in from Rhodesia the day before. They plan to stay a week, or longer if necessary, at the expense of the Zimbabwe-Rhodesian government.

## Information providers

*Peter Sommer and Duncan Campbell write:* The public launch, on Tuesday, of a 'new form of mass media' was a small and little heeded step in the history of communications. The grand occasion was the public connection to the telephone network of the Post Office's new Prestel computers, which supply information to an ordinary television screen. The new service is supposed to provide low cost electronic information to business and domestic customers, using the ordinary telephone system. Hitherto, the air has been thick with unfulfilled visionary statements about the potential of the view data service, as it was originally known. But the development programme has been subject to a series of postponements and reappraisals; the service introduced this week is in the London area only, and is nine months behind schedule.

The core of the problem is that the development of the new service has been co-ordinated by a fragile grouping of the Post Office (who supply the phone system and computers to hold information), the so-called 'Information Providers' who put the information into the computers and receive revenue on its use, and the set manufacturers. In this slightly informal atmosphere, with each side looking to the other for leadership, no-one has seen to it that the public can actually buy the special TV sets for the service at a reasonable price. Sets now cost between £700 and £1000, and the set manufacturing industry clearly would like a government safety net before venturing into cost-cutting mass production. Such a safety net is unlikely to be forthcoming.

The IP's are understandably disgruntled that their considerable investment in providing over 130,000 electronics 'pages' is going to be slow in coming to fruition, if ever. Inevitably too, unexpectedly high costs mean that the Prestel service is being slanted more and more towards use by business. None of the parties has been helped by the recent VAT increase – which also affects information access – on Prestel, unlike all other commercial and information media. Post Office costs – already estimated at £14 million a year – are escalating, and will mount as new provincial computer centres are brought into service. Internal pressure to increase charges, however, is hardly likely to encourage the interested public.

## Libya celebrates

*Michael Sheridan writes:* Down on the Tripoli sea-front the posters of Arab leaders who came to Libya to celebrate the tenth anniversary of Colonel Gaddafi's coup d'etat are slowly peeling off the freshly whitewashed wall, revealing large unpainted patches beneath their surface. To more than one journalist who passed it every day this wall has come to symbolise the elaborate show to which 250 of the world's press were treated here last week.

In attendance to dance to Gaddafi's tune were a singularly unpleasant assembly of Middle Eastern potentates and strongmen, including Syria's Hafez Assad, Crown Prince Abdullah of Saudi Arabia, the Algerian president Chadli and the leaders of Gulf States and South Yemen. Malta's Dom Mintoff and the Tunisian leader Habib Bourguiba – both of whom have their differences with Gaddafi at the moment – stayed away. In addition to the heads of state, a motly assortment of unlikely characters appeared in the Libyan capital, exercising consider-

able fascination for the press. Vanessa Redgrave held court in the Beach Hotel, but was declared to be 'far too busy with her political work' to give interviews, whilst Billy Carter held forth to anybody prepared to buy him a Coca-Cola.

With little hard news to report, and even less information forthcoming from Libyan officials, the press resorted to camping out in the hotel lobby, where huddled groups scrutinised each other, the Libyans and anyone unfortunate enough to enter the building. Periodically a harrassed official would harangue the assembled media through a loudhailer ('You go now, quick, quick, very important press conference').

Few journalists have had a chance to penetrate beneath the surface – the chaotic inefficiency of arrangements and the ever-present guides saw to that. Within a few days the airlines were besieged by newsmen booking seats to Rome, Tunis, Athens, Algiers, or indeed anywhere you could get a drink. Independence of any kind was out – when one journalist hired a car, within 48 hours it was suddenly required for another client. It then sat untouched in the car park for nearly a week. A German TV crew wanted to film the camel market: 'Camel market? It does not exist' declared their guide. The German protested: 'But we saw it from



the road'. 'Oh, well, maybe there is – I don't know. But you have camels in Germany, why can't you film them there?' Photography of any subject that did not include Gaddafi, the masses, the ubiquitous colour green, or preferably a combination of all three was also unwelcome.

## Rumania's oilgate

*Gabriel Ronay writes:* While President Ceausescu grapples with Rumania's energy crisis – no supplies of Russian oil and dwindling national reserves – the people of the country are coping in more down-to-earth fashion. A hundred managers and key employees of the state petrol company PECO have just been arrested for theft, fraud, and maladministration of state oil resources in a complex swindle in which they helped themselves to 900,000 litres of petrol and over a million litres of oil derivatives.

According to the journal *Flacara* the PECO gang could not explain the origins of 2.3 million lei (almost £100,000) found on them at the time of their arrest or how they had financed the purchase of property worth 6 million lei from their salaries, which averaged less than £80 a month.

The arrested include pump attendants, accountants, higher paid administrative officials and station managers. A further batch of people, including depot managers, tanker drivers and mechanics have been hauled in for questioning. They cannot say how over 350,000 litres of oil and oil products went missing or where 710,000 litres of oil derivatives, found at depots around the country came from.

The method used by those arrested was fairly simple. They are accused of taking from the depots twice or three times as much petrol as shown on the

invoices; delivering two star petrol instead of 4-star; mixing cheap oil derivatives with high octane petrol and selling it as 4-star; buying official petrol vouchers from motorists at knock down prices of 1-2 lei and reselling them at the going rate of 4.50 lei.

The PECO gang managed to create an independent petrol market which responded to the laws of supply and demand. From secret stores at petrol depots they directed supplies to 'fixed' PECO petrol stations in the capital and throughout 14 counties. PECO's inspectors are accused of having helped the swindle by not inspecting the company's service stations and the entire management has been charged with indifference and negligence.

It seems that the gang were caught out by their greed. They had created a special group of mechanics and electricians whose job it was to adjust petrol meters so that they showed higher sales than actually pumped out. A suspicious motorist called in the law. One mechanic was found to have 200,000 lei stashed away in a mattress and in deposit accounts. 200 bottles of Scotch whisky and a suitcase full of Western cigarettes. He also owned a privately-built house and a smart new Dacia car on a monthly salary of £75.

## The FBI and Seberg

*Tim Gopsill writes:* The suicide of the enigmatic Jean Seberg, found dead in her car in a Paris side street on Sunday, has brought the stock sad commentary, heavy with menopausal overtones, about the depression caused by a career in decline, the failure of three marriages and so on. There was good reason for Seberg's neurosis that hasn't made the British media (though it's this week's scandal in Paris); and it won't be referred to in this week's *Newsweek* either. Seberg felt that her radical activities in the late sixties had made her a target for the FBI, and documents she obtained under the Freedom of Information Act in the States proved the feeling was not paranoia.

In 1970, gossip articles appeared in the *Los Angeles Times* and *Newsweek* to the effect that she was pregnant by a US Black Panther leader, Raymond Hewitt. At the time she was six months pregnant, but not, she maintained, by him; and the distress of the (unchecked) articles caused the miscarriage of baby girl, a trauma from which her then husband, French writer Romain Gary, has said she never recovered. Gary has specifically said this week that her depression was directly caused by the smear, and the documents show this was more or less what the FBI intended.

They are a series of telegrams between the FBI's Los Angeles field station and the Director (then still Hoover) in Washington, in which he clearly gives the go-ahead for a smear campaign. In one, dated 6 May 1970, he says: 'Jean Seberg has been a financial supporter of the Black Panther party and should be neutralised. Her current pregnancy while still married affords an opportunity for such effort.'

The Los Angeles plan, revealed in a telegram of 27 April 1970, ran as follows: to circulate to Hollywood gossip columnists this letter from 'a fictitious person':

I was just thinking about you and remembered I owe you a favour, so... I was in Paris last week and ran into Jean Seberg, who was heavy with baby. I thought she and Romaine (*misspelt*) had gotten together again, but she confided the child belonged to the minister of the Black Panther party, Masai Hewitt. The dear girl is getting around! Anyway, I think you might scoop the others. Be good and see you soon, love, Sol.

On the basis of this tenuous source, Joyce Haber of the *L.A. Times* ran a piece on 19 May. It didn't name Seberg, but its 'Miss A' couldn't have been anyone else, to those who knew the career described. Los Angeles proudly sent a cutting to Hoover on 6 June. *Newsweek* picked up the titbit, though writer Edward Behr, now Paris-based European editor, is adamant that the source was not the FBI smear. Seberg and Gary sued *Newsweek* for libel in the French courts and were awarded damages of around \$30,000.