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The Economist

FEBRUARY 6TH-12TH 1993

SIGNAL FROM STERLING

pages 12 and 25

WHAT PRICE RISK?

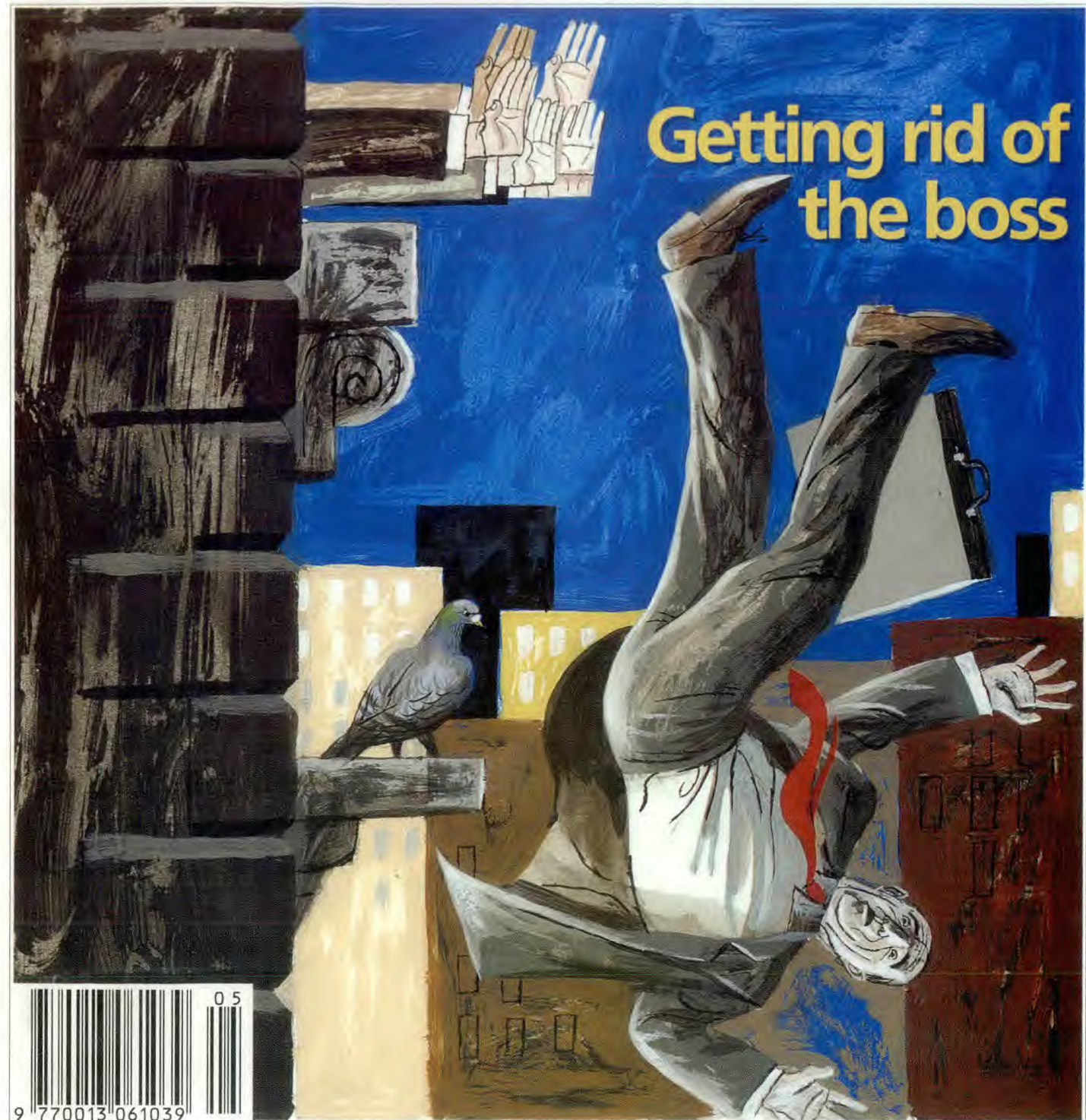
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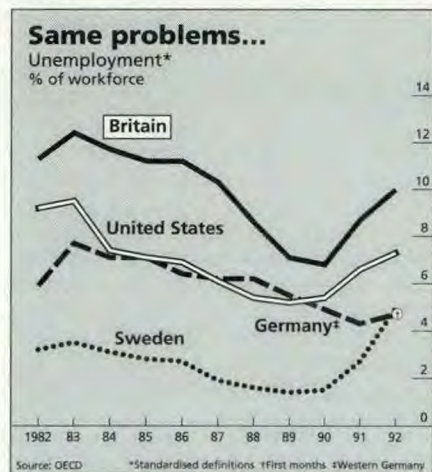
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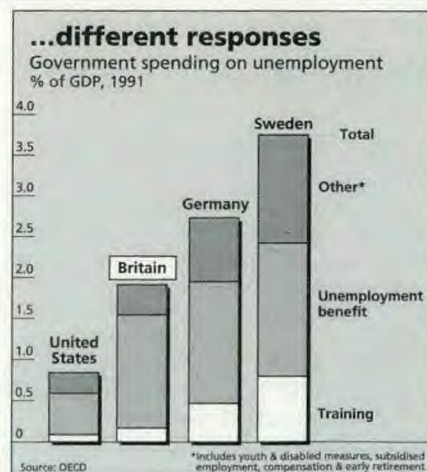


of welfare claimants. Poorer state governments are using workfare to fill jobs at 40-60% of the normal cost. Bill Clinton wants to promote an extension of the workfare system, but under a politically correct name.

Back in Europe, the extravagant and effective Swedish programme is being cut. It gave the unemployed 80% of the previous wage, offered counselling from the first day of unemployment, training throughout the period of unemployment, relocation grants and a guarantee of a state job if no private-sector employment was available after a year. The state could withdraw benefits from people who refused a job or training.

This worked while unemployment was low, but threatened to bankrupt the country when it started rising. Now, the proportion of wages paid to the unemployed is being cut, and instead of employing the unemployed the government is subsidising jobs in the private sector. Employers have got wise to this, and are replacing their workforces with subsidised unemployed.

Germany's system is generous and thorough. In particular, Germany spends lots of time, effort and money on training people. Unification absorbed the easterners into the generous German benefits system, and has



put it under pressure. A battle over reforms is in progress. All these countries have one thing in common: nowhere are people satisfied with their own system.

Drawing the Jewish line

WHEN John Major meets Bill Clinton in the White House on February 24th, he may not know it but he will be in part of an *eruv*, an area where orthodox Jews can forget about some of their normal Sabbath restrictions. On the same day back in Britain, Barnet council's planning committee is due to decide whether six square miles (15.5 square kilometres) of leafy north London can become an *eruv* too. Controversy over the decision is fierce.

As you might expect of an idea thought up by Solomon, the *eruv* is an ingenious invention. On the day of rest, orthodox Jews may not carry things in public places. But carrying is permitted in the home. By marking out an area as an *eruv*, Jews symbolically extend the "private" domain where they can push prams and wheelchairs or carry keys and food on the Sabbath. Existing boundaries, such as railways or motorways, can form the perimeter, but any gaps need to be filled by symbolic "gateways" of thin wire stretched between tall, slender poles. Barnet's *eruv* would run along the M1 motorway and the tracks of the Northern Line, but it would also need 85 poles.

Although *eruvim* have existed for centuries, they have lately been spreading fast. The United States has dozens, many of them—like those in Baltimore, Los Angeles and Miami—inaugurated in the 1980s. The one that contains the White House in Washington dates from 1990; Boston's *eruv* opened last December. There are *eruvim* in Toronto and Mel-



Welcome to an *eruv*

bourne, in Antwerp and Strasbourg. London already has a tiny one (since 1990), in a Golders Green cul-de-sac.

So why the fuss? Opponents say the poles, some of which would be in Hampstead Garden Suburb, a conservation area, would be ugly; but they have deeper worries too. "I'm very disturbed indeed, because we all know on what frail foundation religious toleration rests," says Lord McGregor, who besides being chairman of the Press Complaints Commission was also chairman of the Hampstead Garden Suburb Trust until he resigned over the *eruv* at a stormy meeting last September. He fears that, by introducing religious considerations into planning decisions, the *eruv* would set a dangerous precedent; "totem poles" might come next.

The most vigorous anti-*eruv* campaigners are themselves Jewish. The scheme is sponsored by the United Synagogue, the main body of orthodox Jews in Britain. But some ultra-orthodox sects are

quietly ignoring the *eruv*: how are they to know that some piece of the wire has not snapped during the Sabbath? Liberal Jews tend to be openly hostile. Many say the wires and fences remind them of the ghettos and camps from which they escaped. They see the plan as divisive and fear it will incite anti-Semitism. They predict an influx of orthodox Jews that would change the area. Roy Shutz, the Conservative leader of Barnet council, dislikes the idea of an "insular" group asking for special treatment: it is, he says, a question of integration versus segregation.

Supporters argue that the *eruv* is a "fence of freedom, not of incarceration". It would benefit more than 10,000 orthodox Jews, they say, and do no harm to any of the other 170,000 people living in the area. In a zone that already has 40,000 poles and 5m feet of wire, most would simply be unaware of it. Edward Black of the United Synagogue's Eruv Committee claims the demand for an *eruv* is generated partly by the growing power of orthodox women who want to wheel their babies on the Sabbath. He also points to the trouble-free experience elsewhere. Tom Bradley, the mayor of Los Angeles, wrote to reassure Barnet that "the fears expressed by those who were initially opposed to the *eruv* never materialised."

Eruv supporters mustered 3,333 signatures to a petition delivered to Barnet town hall last month. Anti-*eruv* campaigners are organising a counter-petition. The lawyers among them are also, in the best Talmudic tradition, poring over the minutiae of English law in a bid to scupper the plan. The decision on February 24th promises to be close.