

'An obsession with those people' from Der Spiegel (1 April 1964)

Caption: On 1 April 1964, the German weekly publication Der Spiegel focuses on the issue of the price of German wheat and on the FRG's European policy in this area.

Source: Der Spiegel. Das Deutsche Nachrichten-Magazin. Hrsg. AUGSTEIN, Rudolf. 01.04.1964, n° 14. Hamburg: Spiegel Verlag Rudolf Augstein KG. "Manie dieser Leute".

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Bonn: EEC

An obsession with those people

For Bonn's Minister for Agriculture, Werner Schwarz, the stone-faced guest is fast becoming a standard role. He once again had nothing to say to the other EEC Agriculture Ministers on the subject of grain prices at last Tuesday's Conference in Brussels.

This time, however, his European colleagues knew he was stone-walling with top-level approval. Ludwig Erhard had buried his better judgement with state honours and publicly assured the Bundestag's farming lobby that the West German grain price would remain at its lonely peak at least until the end of 1966.

This publicity gift for three million voting farmers does not come cheap. With the exception of the Federal Republic, all the EEC countries approve the proposal by the Dutch EEC Commissioner, Sicco Mansholt, that the Six act as quickly as possible to adjust their different grain prices to a mean value. A decision on the future level of this price is also the prerequisite for successful negotiations with the Americans on reciprocal customs reductions in the forthcoming Kennedy Round.

Notwithstanding this, the Chancellor let the Bonn coalition's 'green warriors' walk all over him shortly before the decisive price talks in Brussels.

Farm lobbyists Detlef Struve and Bernhard Bauknecht had already performed a practice run at the CDU Party Conference in Hanover. In their opinion, a mean grain price would be unacceptable for West German farmers. Referring to the Brussels officials, Mr Bauknecht said, 'The plan is an obsession with those people.'

The party conference plenary session, in the grips of election fever, endorsed a 'Programme on Agricultural Policy', according to which, 'Maintenance of the German agricultural price level within the EEC is the prime condition for the continued existence of agricultural undertakings.' The programme's author, North Rhine-Westphalia's Agriculture Minister, Gustav Niermann, implored his party friends, 'Only by approving this programme can we regain the absolute majority.'

Those banging the agriculture drum knew that danger was imminent. On Mr Erhard's desk lay a report on EEC grain prices that he had requested from State Secretaries Rudolf Hüttebräuker (Agriculture), Rolf Lahr (Foreign Affairs), Fritz Neef (Economy) and Walter Grund (Finance). They argued very reasonably that, 'Bonn should undertake as of now to accept the European price in 1967; as from 1 January 1966, the Federal Republic could, at all events, be forced to do so by a simple majority in the Council of Ministers in Brussels, and it is doubtful whether the partners would then still be prepared to grant EEC subsidies to German farmers.'

The report by the State Secretaries (Mr Struve's comment: 'These are just manoeuvrings') was promptly brushed aside by the farm lobby. On Wednesday evening of the week before last, on the eve of the Bundestag plenary session on agriculture, farmers from both coalition parties marched to the Palais Schaumburg.

The Christian Democrats first spoke alone with their Chancellor. Mr Erhard protested, 'Gentlemen, please realise that we will run into serious problems in the Kennedy Round.' But when FDP reinforcements arrived, the Head of Government gave in.

The next day, at the Bundestag plenary session, he vowed to German farmers that he would hold the grain price until 1966 and would not, in the meantime, commit to any later price reductions. The only promise the Chancellor would not make was that of guaranteeing the grain price through to the end of the EEC development phase in 1970.

As a precaution, however, the 'Greens' had already formulated a petition aimed at nailing the Government

down until 1970. The Bundestag obediently decided to ‘reject the fixing of a common grain price before the end of the transitional period.’

As expected, the Chancellor’s price bomb in the Bundestag immediately sparked further explosions in Brussels. De Gaulle, who, unlike the liberal Erhard, had never been much in favour of customs concessions to the USA, announced through his Agriculture Minister, Edgard Pisani, that if Bonn remained unwilling to cooperate in the grain price discussions and negotiations with the Americans on agricultural import tariffs could not therefore go ahead, France for its part would refuse to discuss industrial tariffs.

The Kennedy Round was thus put in danger, and Bonn was the scapegoat. Werner Schwarz, however, remained tenacious: ‘This is Herr Schmücker’s business. There is nothing I can say about it.’

After the meeting, Mr Pisani said, ‘He acts as if he had nothing to do with the German Federal Government.’