

‘Interview with Charles Héger, Minister for Agriculture’ from La Libre Belgique (18 January 1953)


Caption: On 18 January 1953, in an article published in the daily newspaper La Libre Belgique, Charles Héger, Belgian Agriculture Minister, discusses the chances of success for the common agricultural market and the proposed European green pool.

Source: La Libre Belgique. 18.01.1953, n° 18; 70e année. Bruxelles: Edition de la Libre Belgique S.A. "L'interview de M. Héger ministre de l'Agriculture", p. 16.

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Interview with Mr Charles Héger, Minister for Agriculture

Mr Charles Héger, the Minister for Agriculture, was kind enough to invite us to his office in Place Quételet. He was not afraid of being interviewed. However, since the Minister did not know in advance the subjects which we proposed to discuss with him, he began by protesting that these were subjects which required some prior reflection.

When we insisted, however, Mr Héger agreed to reply off the cuff to our questions. His replies are set out in the following paragraphs.

Belgian agriculture in 1953

Mr Héger began by saying that it is always dangerous to try to predict the future, particularly when it comes to agriculture, where a whole series of factors are beyond our control. This is true, for example, of the volume and quality of production, which depend on the weather and its influence on sowing, crop growth, plant health and harvesting conditions, and it also applies just as much to animal products as to crops.

That leaves two factors, namely the cost of production and the selling price of agricultural products.

As far as production costs are concerned, here, again, there are certain factors which are beyond our control. Wages are an important factor. Parliament has allowed a certain level of increase in farm rents, and fertilisers are products originating from industry, over which we have little influence.

However, one aspect which *does* depend on us is the technical side. From this point of view, we may anticipate some of the results of the research which scientists have been working on for several years and which has been stepped up in the last two years. I am thinking here of the research into the selective breeding of improved seed and the control of plant diseases. Then there is the research into ways of improving sugar-beet production, where experimentation has confirmed the theories, with particular regard to early sowing.

In livestock farming, too, practical experience confirms scientific data relating to the rational feeding of farm animals. Progress has been made in simplifying the production of fodder crops: many areas of grassland are starting to be either ploughed up or regenerated. This is shown very clearly by the many applications for loans to enable such operations to be carried out.

Significant progress has also been made in the preservation of feedstuffs, for example in improving silos — just think about all the nutrients which are still being lost in open silos, for example. Progress has also been made in haymaking and in the control of livestock diseases.

Inspection of the dairy herd, which is essential for the elimination of parasites, has resulted in significant improvement. Artificial insemination and the shared use of selected sires are starting to bear fruit in new generations of livestock. Subsidies have been granted to improve pig breeds, and the results are all the more important because of the crisis which pig farming is currently experiencing and which has drawn the attention of pig farmers to the importance of producing only heavy pigs with good feed-conversion ratios. Another factor which helps to reduce production costs is the formation of cooperatives. The Ministry is keen to promote the cooperative concept and all its many manifestations.

Those, then, as I was saying just now, are the factors which will, we hope, produce results in 1953.

There remains, of course, the selling prices for agricultural products. It is difficult to predict what they will be this year.

There is no doubt that farmers will be able to make an effort to meet consumers' requirements, but we must not forget that, in the final analysis, they are still dependent upon the purchasing power of their Belgian or foreign customers and upon domestic and international economic cycles.

What will be the American policy in this area? It is difficult to say. According to the initial information in our possession, the Americans are quite optimistic about 1953. By contrast, world markets are somewhat sluggish as far as cereals are concerned.

Then again, what will be the effect of the International Wheat Agreement? It seems to be rather difficult to manage. There are two opposing tendencies, the American tendency, which would like to see an increase of 25 % in the prices applied, and the British tendency, which wants that increase to be 10 % at the most.

Some countries which, to date, have been major exporters no longer appear to have the same exportable surpluses available. This applies to Argentina, for example, which is currently concentrating on developing its industrial sector at the expense of agricultural production.

Other American countries seem to be adopting the US position and moving towards aligning their prices with those of the United States, pursuing a policy of agricultural price support, which would prevent the sale of wheat, for example, at prices lower than 220 cents per bushel.

As far as sugar is concerned, Cuba's policy will have a crucial influence on the world market and on the results of the forthcoming International Sugar Conference.

When it comes to fruit and pigs, I think that it would not be presumptuous to say that their prices have fallen as low as they are going to fall, and they could now start to recover to some extent.

Personally, however, I do not think that I can say that prices for agricultural products in general will rise in 1953.

Efforts will therefore have to be made, above all, to try to reduce production costs. Moreover, this is the main reason for the scientific public-information campaign which has been running for the past two years and which will be continued in 1953.

The efforts made by the Ministry, however, must be matched — and this is the most important aspect — by a receptive attitude on the part of farmers themselves.

Benelux

As far as Benelux is concerned, we have had great difficulty in implementing the protocol in 1952. As a result of the almost permanent contact which has been established between representatives of the three countries involved, it has been possible to apply the minimum price system more or less normally. Admittedly, there have been some setbacks in recent weeks, with particular regard to butter. However, on that subject, I am coming round to the idea that speculation has not been confined to just one side of the border.

There are some sectors where we were justified in hoping for good results which have not, in fact, materialised. This applies, in particular, to cut flowers. It also applies to root chicory, which places Belgian producers in a very difficult position.

I do not think that it would be asking too much to expect our partners to adopt an understanding attitude towards these problems. It seems to me, in fact, that they should be satisfied in having secured, in the agricultural sector, a market which is regarded as preferential for them.

Since we have made these concessions to them, it is only reasonable that those concessions should be restricted to Dutch production only and not applied to products originating elsewhere.

It would be inconceivable to allow Dutch producers to imagine that, by stepping up competition, they can take the place of our own home producers, whose activities are doubly justified on both social and economic grounds.

What is more, the reasons which justified the drafting of the protocol do not appear to have lost any of their relevance. There is no doubt that the disparity between Dutch and Belgian production costs has increased. In the Netherlands, for example, wages are kept in line with the cost-of-living index minus 5 %, and farm rents remain at their former levels. In Belgium, on the other hand, wages are index-linked without any corrective adjustment, and farm rents have also been adjusted.

I am convinced that the creation of a favourable climate is brought about principally by the spirit of a convention and the manner in which it is applied, rather than by the strict interpretation of its wording.

The Green Plan

When we turn our attention to the question of the 'Green Plan', we are looking at a particularly complex area. The place which agriculture, seen as an economic entity, occupies in each of the various countries involved is not always the same. It will either benefit from, or suffer the harmful effects of, the climate of that country and its economic, social and monetary position.

It is difficult to compare the farming sector with the industrial sector, where we can limit ourselves to one or two essential products such as coal and steel.

The results of the *Conférence des intérimaires*, which has just finished in Paris, only serve to accentuate this impression of the extreme complexity of the problem, and we can now be certain that there will be a mountain of paperwork arising from these discussions.

Even from the doctrinal viewpoint, initial contacts revealed various and sometimes very different positions. One might well imagine that there have been considerable developments since our initial conversations on the subject of a common agricultural market.

At that time, it was possible to believe that the organisation of certain specific communities would make it easier to study, if not to achieve, the political integration which we hardly dared to mention. Now, however, it has become possible to express this political idea, and certain efforts are being made, apparently with a view to turning that idea into a reality. Accordingly, the organisation of common markets will surely be a consequence of political integration rather than its precursor. If that is the case, our main concern in the context of the 'Green Plan' will be of an economic nature. If we look at things from that point of view, we shall have to establish a hierarchy among the goals which we are seeking to attain. Certain concerns now appear to predominate. Among those concerns, I would cite the following examples: aid must be provided to cushion the effect of the dollar deficit, which now seems to be chronic; the total amount of products made available to consumers must be increased; and producers must be given a guarantee that farming will be profitable and secure.

In order to attain these objectives, is it necessary to move towards a policy of strict planning? Would it not be more advantageous to bring together the greatest possible number of countries and seek to achieve these objectives and to find a common denominator, which consists in identifying the type or types of production which should be encouraged, and then determining the methods which should be implemented? To take just one example, the cultivation of wheat could be increased without any disadvantage to any European country.

If that is the objective, and if those are the circumstances in which work has to commence, we must be careful to guard against any improvisation and to avoid any upsets.

It is on that condition, and on that condition alone, that we shall be able to ensure that the Green Plan stays green, the colour of hope.

Finally, I welcome the collaboration of the professional organisations, their attitude and their spirit, faced with major problems both internal and external. By not confining themselves to the role of 'the farmers' champion', but rather by educating farmers and making efforts to inform and guide them, they deserve the confidence which our farmers place in them.