

Open letter from Sicco Mansholt to the President of the Belgian Farmers' Union (Brussels, 31 March 1971)

Caption: On 31 March 1971, following the demonstrations by European farmers in Brussels, Sicco Mansholt, European Agriculture Commissioner, writes to the President of the Belgian Farmers' Union and invites him to speak in a public debate about the implications of a reform of the common agricultural policy (CAP).

Source: Internationaal Instituut voor Sociale Geschiedenis, Amsterdam. Sicco L. Mansholt (1945-1995). Milieu. Teksten van lezingen van J. Linthorst Homan. In manuscript en gedrukt. 1951-1953, 528.

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Open letter to the President of the Belgische Boerenbond (Belgian Farmers' Union) (Brussels, 31 March 1971)

Dear Mr Boon,

Now that you have compared me, in a somewhat impassioned open letter, with a rat in a cage which bites whatever it can and your organisation 'het Groene Front' [the Green Front] has called me a European technocrat who has, for years, goaded European farmers with all kinds of accusations, threats and unworkable plans, a profound lack of understanding for their situation and a cynical contempt for their efforts regarding productivity, it would appear to me that the time has come to put our discussion on a rather more even keel.

Such equilibrium was also lacking in the information issued by your organisation in the final weeks prior to the Brussels demonstration, which ended so tragically. It is this information to which I referred when the press asked me, during those events, for my opinion on the demonstration.

A few weeks prior to the Brussels demonstration, I expressed my concern about the often thoughtless way in which the question of agricultural prices is dealt with by many board members of agricultural organisations in Europe and about the information which was issued regarding the European Commission's proposals for structural reforms.

This I noted as a general phenomenon and did not refer to you specifically. However, since you are the only one who reacted to my observation, I would also like to respond to you.

I believe that, through peaceful discussion in public, we can make it clear to the farmers, for whom these issues are of primary importance after all, what we want and how we intend to achieve it. Secondly, we can, by providing such information, attempt to clear up misunderstandings and thereby contribute to an objective assessment of the policy both of the Commission and of the European Community per se.

I am sure that you will agree with me that I have a certain right to justify our policy after having been verbally and visually hanged several times and placed in a coffin at your demonstration in Brussels.

In response to my request for dialogue, you demand that I first prove that the information that you issued was unsound. Very well, I shall do so. You will understand that I must be brief in this regard and that I shall therefore merely provide a few examples.

Firstly, I refer to the annual speech that you gave to the Boerenbond (see *De Boer* of 27 January 1970). With reference to the Memorandum of the European Commission, you stated on three occasions that the Commission was promoting a policy of substantial price cuts in order to curb production.

This is untrue.

The policy on prices is set out precisely by the Commission in the following paragraph:

(§ 57) In the next few years, pricing policy could be based on the following principles: as regards products of which there are structural surpluses, there is permanent pressure on prices, and any increase in these prices would appear to be ruled out in the short term. This will be possible only when, account being taken of foreign trade, the demand arising from the growth in the population and incomes has exceeded supply. As regards the other products, price increases will be possible as and when the increase in demand allows.

Secondly, I would like to say something about the information on pricing policy issued recently by het Groene Front. Anyone following the campaign must have concluded that there was a wide disparity between what was being demanded by the European farmers' organisations, on the one hand, and what was being proposed by the Commission, on the other, and, consequently, that the European Commission's proposals constituted a gross misunderstanding of the situation. See, *inter alia*, the calls in *De Boer* under the titles: 'Vuistslag op de

Ministerstafel' (Thump on the Minister's desk) and 'Groen Front roept op' (Groen Front issues a call).

However, what, actually, was the case regarding the major products? As regards wheat, a 'psychological price increase' was requested which was translated by Germany as 5 %, the Netherlands as 4 %, Belgium as 2 % and France and Italy as 0 %. The Commission proposed a 'psychological increase' of 2 % of the target price.

As regards milk, the Commission proposed 5 %, and COPA requested 6 %. Having regard to the processing margins, this is a difference of around 1½ %.

As regards feed barley, the agricultural organisations proposed an increase of 5 %, and the Commission proposed the same percentage. As regards malting barley, the organisations proposed a further increase in the price through a special measure but failed to answer the question of how this was to be implemented.

As regards beef and veal, an increase of 10 % was proposed. The Commission accepted this increase, but only if spread over two years, because it takes the view that the market cannot bear a one-off increase.

Furthermore, since it also deemed the proposals for price increases to be inadequate for substantial categories of farmers, the Commission proposed direct income subsidies of around 20 000 Belgian francs per year per holding, amongst other things because it considered that any price increase would principally help larger farmers and not smaller ones.

The organisations' board members were aware that the demands relating to pricing policy differed in the various European countries, but they completely disregarded this fact in their address to the Brussels demonstration. They knew that the major sister organisation in France did not consider an increase in cereals or sugar beet prices to be desirable and that the major Italian farmers' organisations regarded an increase in the maize price as undesirable.

That brings me to the next point of my statement to the press, namely that many of the organisations' board members are putting forward only their national demands and thereby going around campaigning as if prices were still fixed nationally in Bonn, Rome or Paris. In that respect, I cited the example of Germany, where the German Farmers' Union is calling for a cereals price increase of 10 % at all its meetings, knowing full well that various sister organisations in other Community countries do not want this. I shall leave aside the fact that the deputy chairman of this organisation got the farmers and dozens of tractors out on to the street by calling for an 18 % increase in the price of barley and maize. It should be clear to you, too, that this does not constitute objective information and that the farmers are being let down in this regard.

I am very concerned that this distorted black-and-white presentation of the situation will give rise to divisions which are not real and could easily cause eruptions which must be avoided in the interests of both the population as a whole and the farmers in particular.

I would therefore ask you once again to deal with the difficult issues facing both of us in a constructive public dialogue so that the public has a better understanding of the problems with which farmers have to contend.

Yours sincerely,

S. L. Mansholt