

'S. L. Mansholt — the “great lock-keeper” of European agriculture’ from the Communauté européenne (February 1962)

Caption: In February 1962, the monthly publication Communauté européenne pays tribute to Sicco Mansholt, the architect of the common agricultural policy (CAP).

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The ‘great lock-keeper’ of European agriculture

S. L. Mansholt

Long before it came to the notice of the *Immortels* – the distinguished members of the Académie Française – the farming community learned that the French language had been enriched by the coining of a new expression – *le prix d'écluse* (the sluice-gate price). As our readers will have guessed, this term does not relate to waterway transport but to a new economic concept. This sluice-gate was designed to protect pig-breeders in the Common Market against waves of cheap imports of these animals from other parts of the world.

It comes as no surprise to learn that the term was coined by a Dutchman. Its inventor, the Vice-President of the Common Market executive, Mr Sicco Mansholt, is, like his compatriots, a man of the sea and a man of the soil. A passionate yachtsman, he spends almost all his rare hours of leisure sailing his yacht on the Scheldt estuary, in the company of his family.

But Mr Mansholt is also a man of the soil: a farmer who was sorely distressed at having to leave his farm on the new Wieringemeer polder when he moved to Brussels in 1958 to take up the post of Vice-President of the Common Market Commission. Throughout his 12 years as Minister of Agriculture in The Hague, he continued to look after his farm, where he spent every weekend with his wife and four children.

So is he one of those gentleman farmers who are to be found in great numbers among the politicians on the other side of the Atlantic? Not at all. He was involved in clearing the recently drained polders in the Zuider Zee. This was the basis on which he was able to set up a farm on the land that was ‘reclaimed’ from the sea.

Mr Mansholt, in point of fact, has experience of farming in two continents. After his studies at the College of Tropical Agriculture in Deventer, he left for Java, where he worked for three years on a tea plantation. This was followed by ten years’ work in the Wieringermeer polder.

After the war, he was one of the new men, the former heads of the resistance who entered politics. But he never lost his sense of realism or his practicality. In The Hague, the following story is told: one evening, his chauffeur called on him in his office. ‘Sir,’ he said, ‘I have your five pouches of mail. Where would you like me to put them?’ ‘Bring them here,’ replied Mansholt. Then the chauffeur added, ‘And I have the new engine for your car too.’ ‘Well, in that case, bring the engine to my office right away, and you can leave the mail pouches in the garage.’ Sicco Mansholt has twice had honorary doctorates conferred upon him, but he remains especially proud of his mechanic’s diploma.

It should not be concluded from the above that the founder of the new European agricultural policy is a man of little intellect: he frequently surprises his interlocutors with his grasp of the minutest details and his perfect mastery of the subject under discussion. His secret is not only his wealth of experience but also his capacity for work. In this respect, he resembles Edgard Pisani, the French Minister of Agriculture. In Brussels, after the marathon ministerial meeting, comprising two months of almost uninterrupted discussion, it was plain for anyone to see that Pisani and Mansholt were the only two men who showed no sign of fatigue and indeed were still fresh and alert.

Another common trait is that they are both great sportsmen. During the Christmas festivities, Mr Mansholt had to send a telegram to Friesland to say that he would be unable to take part in the classic 200-kilometre skating event. Referring to the ministerial meeting, he wrote, ‘I have to skate on a quite different course, which is just as slippery, and on which the risk of falling is equally high.’

Being an accomplished skater, however, he did not fall, and two weeks later Europe had its own integral common agricultural policy.

We shall long have cause to wonder how it was possible to devise a common policy for such diverse and sometimes even contradictory interests. No doubt our children will find several explanations for this

phenomenon in their history textbooks in years to come.

But even today, we can emphasise one element that historians may forget to mention, namely the unflagging optimism and tenacity of Mr Mansholt, who has campaigned incessantly for the integration of European agriculture. In 1950, he began to draw up the first plans together with Pierre Pflimlin. This was the heyday of the 'green pool', the time when everyone regarded the two men as somewhat ludicrous Utopians.

In 1959 and 1960, when the Vice-President of the Common Market first presented his plan, the 'Mansholt Plan', a new storm of criticism was unleashed. But he remained optimistic in the face of all the doom and gloom, and the storm did indeed die down. The Ministers amended specific points in the Plan and added further details, but the underlying principles remained intact.

All of which can only bolster confidence in the lock-keeper of European agriculture.