

The green pool

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URL: http://www.cvce.eu/obj/the_green_pool-en-9f03b348-17e4-402c-b2d0-130723e5afd6.html

Last updated: 08/07/2016



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In the 1950s, there were significant disparities in the agricultural sector throughout Western Europe, and these gave rise to important technical as well as political and social questions. Compared with the powerful and very well organised American agricultural sector, Europe was a hotch-potch of national agricultural systems which were sometimes in direct competition. Therefore, the challenge lay in reorganising European agriculture in such a way as to make it competitive on a global scale, whilst fending off any risk of shortages linked to international conflict. The outbreak of the Korean War in June 1950 had, for example, led to a decline in world trade which also affected agricultural products and foodstuffs. In addition, the build-up of significant strategic stocks in Europe and the United States triggered an immediate rise in the prices of those products, and that threatened to further exacerbate the balance of payments deficits in European countries. Europe was therefore obliged to cut imports paid for in dollars by increasing domestic agricultural production and by joint action in reorganising the sector.

There were, however, two long-standing differences in ideology. Some European politicians were indeed tempted by the idea of rapid integration of the agricultural markets, while others preferred more flexible cooperation within existing European structures. The Organisation for European Economic Cooperation (OEEC), the Assembly of the Council of Europe and the European Movement had already expressed their support for the gradual creation of a single market for agricultural products in Europe. Inspired to a certain extent by the plan for a 'black pool' for coal and steel launched by Robert Schuman in May 1950, various projects for a 'green pool' saw the light of day. The Netherlands and France, exporting countries that were firmly in favour of European economic unification, decided to go ahead.

In June 1950, the former French Agriculture Minister, Pierre Pflimlin, presented to the French Parliament a plan for the creation of a European organisation to improve the marketing of European produce and to stabilise agricultural prices. However, under this plan for a European agricultural structure, the French also wanted to secure new outlets for some of their own products which were in surplus (wheat, butter, wine, sugar, etc.) as they could see the end of Marshall Aid looming on the horizon. Having been reappointed Agriculture Minister in July of the same year, Pflimlin outlined his plan to his colleagues in the government. He wanted to set up a genuine agricultural common market, free from customs duties and quotas and open to countries other than the six that were already involved in negotiations on the Schuman Plan. He also envisaged the creation of a High Authority for agriculture with powers clearly defined by a treaty. Although it was interested, the French Government preferred to focus on the plan for a coal and steel pool before becoming fully involved in an extensive plan exclusively for agriculture.

In the meantime, Pflimlin refined his project in close collaboration with his Dutch counterpart, Sicco Mansholt, who also advocated the establishment of a European Agricultural Community over a transitional period. French politicians, however, remained divided as to the nature of the proposed supranational body and the appropriateness of opening up this Community to all members of the OEEC. In March 1951, the French Government therefore decided to ask the Council of Europe to organise a diplomatic conference on agriculture in order to review the French proposals.

For his part, Sicco Mansholt was equally convinced that the complete liberalisation of trade in agricultural products within Europe should take place as a matter of urgency. For this reason, he envisaged the creation of a European Agricultural Fund with a view to the rationalisation of production and the regulation of prices. He also proposed the establishment of a European Intergovernmental Committee on Agriculture, to be headed by a Council of Ministers and placed under the control of the European Parliament. In contrast to the Pflimlin Plan, which limited the activities of the European Agricultural Community to certain products that affected the French economy, the Mansholt Plan advocated an organisation which covered the entire agricultural output of all the members of the OEEC. Mansholt, who did not enjoy the support of his own government, argued his Plan in various European capitals without, however, achieving the success that he had hoped for. Most of the European States were, in reality, primarily preoccupied with protecting their own national interests, which were fiercely defended by powerful farmers' unions.

Boosted by the ratification of the Treaty establishing the ECSC in April 1951, the idea of a European

Agricultural Conference between Member States of the Council of Europe seemed to gather strength following the organisation of a preparatory conference between the Six on 25 March 1952 at the *Quai d'Orsay* under the leadership of Pierre Pflimlin and Sicco Mansholt, and the establishment of an interim working party. However, the British veto hindered decision-making by the Ministers meeting under the auspices of the Council of Europe. In fact, the British Government rejected any European cooperation that went beyond simple intergovernmental cooperation. The Scandinavian countries followed Britain's lead. Other European countries felt, in the end, that their agriculture was not sufficiently competitive to stand up to foreign competition, to the extent that they became rather reticent about the whole plan for a European Agricultural Community. Moreover, this opposition persisted when the French Government later presented an amended plan, which no longer envisaged the adoption of a High Authority for agriculture.

The reason for this was that, in the meantime, the economic and political context in Europe had undergone a fundamental change. From then on, Europe no longer seemed so keen on the integration of the agricultural sector. It was the resounding failure of the European Defence Community (EDC) in August 1954 which marked the collapse of the sectoral method and the end of federalist ambitions in Europe. The new climate of international détente was no longer conducive to political compromise. Moreover, having been postponed several times, the work of the European Conference on the Organisation of Agricultural Markets — which met only in March 1953 and July 1954 — was finally handed over, in July 1954, to the Council of the OEEC, chaired at that time by the United Kingdom. As they were fiercely opposed to supranational solutions, the British openly supported the principle of a worldwide agricultural policy that was much more in line with the interests that tied Great Britain to its Commonwealth partners. In January 1955, a Ministerial Committee for Agriculture and Food was set up under the OEEC. The plan for a green pool, a significant element in European economic integration, was therefore abandoned in favour of a more traditional intergovernmental approach.

Nevertheless, the experience gained from the assessment of and negotiations on the green pool proved to be useful during subsequent negotiations on the common agricultural policy (CAP). In 1958, Sicco Mansholt became the first Commissioner with special responsibility for Agriculture in the European Economic Community (EEC). The green pool project was also the impetus for organisational improvements in the agricultural sector. In particular, the Franco-German Agricultural Committee, which from June 1955 involved the professional agricultural organisations of both countries, endeavoured to develop a common approach when the Rome Treaties were being drawn up.