

Interview with Sicco Mansholt, from Corriere della Sera (20 February 1969)

Caption: On 20 February 1969, Sicco Mansholt, European Commissioner with special responsibility for agriculture, gives an interview to the Italian daily newspaper Corriere della Sera, on his plan to reform the common agricultural policy (CAP)

Source: Corriere della Sera. dir. de publ. Spadolini, Giovanni. 20.02.1969, n° 42; anno 94. Milano: Corriere della Sera. "Intervista con Sicco Mansholt ", auteur:Riva, Massimo , p. 6.

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Last updated: 06/07/2016

Interview with Sicco Mansholt

Agriculture tomorrow

People will not be driven away from the countryside. The intention is merely to guarantee those who will have to leave anyway a minimum necessary to survive

From our special correspondent

Brussels, February

One in five Italians is now beginning to look to Brussels rather than to Rome to learn about their future. There are still many workers in our country who earn their living from agriculture.

The Green Europe has begun with the integration of markets. Product by product, the Community has laid down minimum intervention prices. However, in the long run this policy has proven to be dangerous and inefficient. By setting a price too low, the large number of small producers are condemned to hunger; fixing a higher figure encourages large and medium-sized organised farms to expand production.

In the last few weeks, the alarm has been raised in Brussels. For the first time, a man at the top of the European hierarchy has dared, without ulterior political motives, to tell small producers the truth about their future or, rather, their lack of a future. A 60-year-old Dutchman, Sicco Mansholt, who comes from a farming family, has dedicated his entire life to that world and is now Vice-President of the EEC Commission, has launched a plan that will radically change the face of our countryside over the next ten years.

One farmer in two will have to leave the land, five million unproductive hectares will have to be abandoned, and three and a half million cows are to be slaughtered in order to halt overproduction of milk. But, above all, under the plan, the myriad of tiny farms will disappear, to be replaced by multi-family businesses on a larger scale which are suitable for different types of production.

I spoke to Mansholt in his office. I began by asking him to review the first 12 years of the Rome Treaties.

‘Agriculture’, began Mansholt, ‘is the Community’s strong point, giving substance to the idea of a united Europe. The ECM has not advanced as far in any other sector of activity; only in agriculture have we achieved a genuinely far-reaching unification. We had the goal of integrating the markets of the six countries and we have succeeded. Intervention, financing, regulation: everything can now be said to be Community.’

‘The general public’, I said to him, ‘does, however, have the feeling that the common market for agriculture has become a dangerous area of disagreement between the six governments.’

‘I disagree. If differences emerge, it is just because we are dealing with a subject that, more than any other, is subject to common control, on which it is therefore necessary to find a compromise from time to time. I said that we have achieved a very profound integration; naturally, this has taken place in the face of thousands of difficulties that have nevertheless been overcome or resolved each time.’

As regards the pricing policy pursued thus far, Mansholt defended its results, but in terms of general policy, that is to say as a means of consolidating the Community organisation. As a technical instrument, he recognised its limitations. ‘We have found that it is very difficult to guide the choices made by agricultural producers merely by fixing intervention prices. In many areas heavy production surpluses are created. I therefore think that in future the pricing policy will definitely have to be supported by structural reform.’

‘With regard to your plan, which is based on strengthening cooperative forms and broad public participation, some have gone as far as to speak of a “socialist landscape” in the countryside. How do you think that extensive planning in agriculture is compatible with the liberal structure of other productive sectors?’

‘We do not expect to impose solutions. We want farmers to be free, we want to give anyone working in the fields the possibility to choose between different options; it will then be their decision. And instead of the current situation that farmers have not chosen, our plan aims to give them the hopes of freedom that are denied in today’s reality.’

‘But how do we get them out of this situation of need?’

‘To that end I have proposed retirement for farmers from the age of 65 and an allowance for anyone who takes early retirement to make room for young people. In short, my plan does not seek to drive people away from the countryside, but to guarantee those who will have to leave anyway a minimum necessary to survive. The majority of European farmers have a lower income than an industrial worker. The exodus is already taking place; it is important to tackle this major social phenomenon with an organisation, without leaving it to its own devices.’

‘The Germans, who perhaps feel the proximity of the cooperatives in communist Germany, have used the word “kolkhoz” with regard to the multi-family farms augured in the plan. What do you think of this definition?’

‘It is pure demagogy. And I am cheered by such arguments: that is to say, really serious objections do not exist. There is much confusion. It is not true that I want to create factories on an industrial model. Rather, I’m thinking of farms that employ three or four people, but with rationally organised labour and highly advanced mechanisation. We have calculated that, with current techniques, a single man can tend 40 dairy cows or 450 pigs or 200 veal calves. So a production unit of three or four people needs to be much larger on average than current ones, which can be achieved in many cases through partnerships between several family groups. I don’t believe that with three or four workers you can talk about a factory.’

‘National governments are often accused of being paralysed in their agricultural policy by electoral interests. In Italy, for example, independent farmers account for around two million votes. What will be the real reactions when faced with the need to make a drastic reduction in the number of agricultural workers?’

‘Above all, I have many doubts as to the dependability of this electoral clientele. In every country, these smallholders who live in miserable conditions are a danger for all the democratic, Christian and socialist parties. In the long run, they are the root of anarchy. I am therefore very happy with the positive comments, all things considered, from Italian organisations as they demonstrate a far-sighted political vision.’

‘In conclusion, the implementation of your plan calls for an extraordinary unity of action from the governments of the six countries and an acceptance of Community development policies going beyond personal interests. Will it be possible?’

‘I believe so. I do not think we have any alternative. It will be implemented because it is necessary. I certainly don’t mean that my plan is the final wisdom, but I’m asking you to look at the reality in the European countryside.’

Massimo Riva