

## 'Like cardinals in conclave', from Der Spiegel (22 July 1974)

**Caption:** On 22 July 1974, the German magazine Der Spiegel ponders on the agricultural policy of the European Communities as regards beef and veal production.

**Source:** Der Spiegel. Das Deutsche Nachrichten-Magazin. Hrsg. AUGSTEIN, Rudolf ; Herausgeber ENGEL, Johannes; BÖHME, Erich. 22.07.1974, n° 30; 28.Jg. Hamburg: Spiegel Verlag Rudolf Augstein GmbH. "Wie die Kardinäle", p. 59.

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## Like cardinals in conclave

### **First, Europe's Agriculture Ministers subsidised cattle rearing, now they are spending over DM 1 000 million to get rid of a beef mountain.**

Word in the countryside was that the enemy was approaching from the sea. On Monday of last week, 300 French farmers stormed the docks at Le Havre, boarded an Argentinian freighter and hurled tonnes of frozen meat into the water. The ship's cargo of meat was not to be permitted to land.

A British lorry loaded with refrigerated meat was ambushed by farmers at St Omer. These latter-day highwaymen poured petrol over the meat and set it alight. Senior officials from the EU headquarters in Brussels were unable to keep their appointments in Luxembourg because the farmers used their tractors to block the motorway between Brussels and the Grand Duchy. In the Schleswig-Holstein district of Dithmarschen, the town of Heide was brought to a standstill for several hours last Thursday when angry farmers drove their tractors through the streets.

'Mob rule,' groaned the West German Minister of Agriculture, Josef Ertl, who, last week, was meeting his eight colleagues from the European Community in Brussels for crisis talks. The French Minister of Agriculture, Christian Bonnet, added, 'We shall sit down together like the cardinals in conclave in the Sistine Chapel when they elect the Pope.' They would not disperse until they had found a solution acceptable to the farmers, who feel that their Agriculture Ministers have taken them for a ride. More than a year ago, in the face of a beef shortage, these same Ministers had advised farmers to change over from dairy production to stock breeding. The Ministers had high hopes that this changeover would lead to a gradual reduction of the European butter mountain and higher incomes for the farmers. A German agricultural official said today, 'At that time, the experts were all agreed that the shortage in the beef market would last for several years.'

The Agriculture Ministers were so convinced by the forecasts of their own experts and of the farmers' officials that they promoted beef production with additional subsidies. The beef prices applied within the European Community went so high that the inevitable result was overproduction. The Economic Community was also still attracting meat from Argentina, Austria, Yugoslavia and Switzerland by cutting import duties.

Just a few months after starting to rear cattle, Europe's farmers felt cheated as their hopes of big profits were dashed. American exporters increased the price of soya beans — the most important additive to the feed given to beef cattle — by about 500 %. Then Morocco, one of the three main producers of artificial fertilisers, demanded almost three times as much from its European customers for its products.

It is true that the cattle dealers who were buying the farmers' animals at the end of 1973 were still paying almost 25 % more than the Agriculture Ministers in Brussels had promised them, but, in the spring, came 'the catastrophe', as one EC official put it.

On the farms, the cattle were now ready for slaughter, and the farmers wanted to cash in. The new herds of cattle poured into the markets, forcing down the prices: the breeders panicked. The 'run on the market', as EC officials described the burgeoning rush to sell, simply depressed cattle prices even further. In the end, dealers and slaughterhouses were offering farmers just 88 % of the fixed price that the EC had deemed necessary.

Finally, in the last few weeks, the farmers could no longer get rid of their cattle even at prices far below those laid down by Brussels because, in the words of one EC official, 'there is not a free hook left in the cold stores'. Stocks of over 135 000 tonnes of meat have built up in cold storage, more than six times the daily requirement for the population of the EC. Every day, the Community of Nine has to pay about DM 1 million for this massive storage operation. 'A colossal act of mismanagement' was the opinion of Thomas Schlier of the Consumers' Association (AGV).

The farmers hold out no hope that the stores will be swiftly cleared. The high prices in the shops have spoiled the appetite of Europe's steak-lovers. The meat-eaters in West Germany alone have, in the first six months of this year, spent about DM 14 000 million at the butchers' shops, about DM 1 900 million more than in the same period last year. At the same time, they have bought 2 kilogrammes of meat less per head than last year. Germany's cattle farmers, however, had to record a drop in income of DM 11 million between January and June. According to Josef Ertl's Junior Minister, Hans Jürgen Rohr, 'The missing billions must have remained with the middlemen.'

The farmers rebelled and forced the Agriculture Ministers into taking some more hasty measures so as to cover up their stunning planning failure for a few months. After two days of discussions in Brussels, they decided to stop cattle imports for three months. Homes for the elderly, hospitals and the armed forces have been told they may buy the meat from cold storage at special prices. The EC is paying a premium of up to DM 256 for each bovine animal that the farmers do not send for slaughter until February. And the cost of this emergency programme? About DM 1 100 million.

'Consumers must see it as a scandal', grumbles Thomas Schlier of the Consumers' Association, 'that, first of all, high prices are imposed on them to finance overproduction and now they have to pay a second time to get rid of the mountain.'