

## Interview with Paul Collowald: Sicco Mansholt and his work at the Commission (Sanem, 27 and 28 June 2002)

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[Étienne Deschamps] What was President Mansholt's conception of European integration and relations with the press?

[Paul Collowald] Sicco Mansholt is, I think, quite well known in contemporary European history because he was the incarnation of the common agricultural policy, which was, as its name indicates, the first Community approach that contained a real dose of supranationality and Sicco Mansholt, who was himself a former Minister of Agriculture, had both the skill and the calibre to conduct this important and fairly delicate operation. Therefore he was one of the most important figures in the Hallstein Commission and, later on, he remained in the succeeding Commission. It so happened that after Jean Rey, who had succeeded Walter Hallstein at the head of the Commission, an Italian, Franco Maria Malfatti, was President of the European Commission. At the time he faced criticism, but in the end he was understood better, for he was an Italian politician and when our Italian friends held elections yet again, and brought them forward, he reckoned that he held a mandate from the people and he announced: 'I am going back to Italy to stand in the elections.' In Brussels, the accredited press, and particularly the German press, I recall, who had a high regard for the President of the European Commission, found it somewhat frivolous to say: 'I may be President of the European Commission, but I prefer to go back to my country.' This took place towards the end of President Malfatti's term of office and there were about nine months left to run. It was all done very swiftly; they said: 'All right then. We shall ask Sicco Mansholt, not just to stand in for him, but to hold the post of President until the end of the term of office.'

This happened in a very important period, because President Malfatti left in March 1972, and in 1972 the negotiations with our British, Irish, Danish and Norwegian friends needed to be brought to a successful conclusion and ended, because the Norwegians had signed the Accession Treaty but later a referendum had said 'no'. In October the French President, Georges Pompidou, had convened a summit in Paris bringing together the six founding States plus the three remaining Accession States. This was obviously quite a delicate and important operation, which was not only covered by the French but also by the international press, and the preparations... It was quite clear that in the various capitals, and in Paris in particular, the role to be played by the Commission was to be a modest one, since from the first indications from my journalist friends in Paris I understood that during the Quai d'Orsay briefing, to put it quite clearly and without the jargon, they let it be known that the role of the Commission would be that of observer. I pointed this out to Sicco Mansholt, because at the time I was spokesman for Raymond Barre, but Sicco Mansholt told me: 'At the end of the Presidency, if I am to operate in France — if the summit takes place in Paris, in brackets — lend me Paul Collowald for the purpose.' He called me in — he had a list of invitations before the Paris Conference took place in October, and he told me: 'I will keep three of them.' That is when I understood his approach to working on public opinion. He had chosen three, which seemed rather strange. If I remember correctly, there was the foreign and diplomatic press in Paris, which was normal, because they sensed that there was a desire to play down the role of the Commission; secondly, the RPF and the young Gaullists; thirdly, in the agricultural context, I cannot recall what the agricultural federation was called, anyway, it was agriculture, France, and Mansholt.

However, I remember one especially that I was particularly responsible for, and it was a press lunch with Mansholt, in Paris, with the diplomatic press. As usual, one could see a list of names and I noticed — *Le Monde* is after all quite an important newspaper in France — that there had been a new appointment as person responsible for their foreign service and that it was Tatu, the Moscow correspondent who had taken up his post a few months beforehand. I realised that a knowledge... — it is understandable that when you have spent years in Moscow, finding yourself enmeshed in our European Community issues cannot be easy. So I said to Sicco Mansholt: 'Regarding the seating arrangements, I shall put myself next to Tatu.' There were several former colleagues at *Le Monde* that I knew, but Tatu was not one of them. I can remember that I hardly ate a thing, but I did explain the situation to him and I noticed — and I confirmed this later on to Sicco Mansholt — that without exaggerating its importance, nonetheless, there was an element of disinformation in saying: 'The Commission, yes, of course...' Then, it came to the point where I said to Sicco Mansholt that we had gone the day before to Paris with Bino Olivi — he was Spokesman and I was

Deputy spokesman — to see what the situation was like in avenue Kléber, in the International Conference Centre, and to look at the system there. We met a number of journalists there and we said: 'We are the spokesmen for Brussels; we have come to have a look around.' They explained to us: 'Ah, yes, we have been given a plan, but apparently the Commission has no place at the table.' I said to myself: 'Here we go; it's starting again.' So I arranged a meeting with several journalists for the following morning, telling them that they could come with their photographers, before the event, and I told them: 'Here is the plan: the Commission is there. Sicco Mansholt is there; next to him is Raymond Barre; next to him is the other German Vice-President, Willy Haferkamp, and an Italian Vice-President; I believe it was Scarascia Mugnozza. That is all.' 'Very well; and will they speak?' I said: 'You can count on Sicco Mansholt to do so.' Then we went with Bino Olivi to look at the distribution of the pressrooms with some sort of timetable: at 9:15, there may be a briefing by the delegation, and so on, but obviously no one knew what Mansholt would say, since he had prepared for this but it depended on the atmosphere, and we programmed it for whatever it was: 10:15 or 10:20, telling Sicco Mansholt: 'President Mansholt, when you have finished speaking, we shall be holding a short briefing because a number of people are under the impression that the Commission is not present, or that it is, at best, an observer, and that it will not be heard.' To which Sicco Mansholt replied: 'Then count on me to say that I will be there!' So he gave a short analysis and then Raymond Barre, who did not come to the Press conference, spoke about the inflation issues, which was his role. In short, therefore: we could see that there was quite an atmosphere there.

It was there, that evening, when they held a large reception for the press at the Precatlan in a magnificent setting, I was involved in an incident with Léon Zitrone, the most famous presenter on French television. How did this incident occur? It was when there was the television news — I do not remember whether it was the 12:30 or the 1:0 p.m. broadcast — I went to my hotel that was nearby. Not a word about the Commission. There was the entrance of the delegations in Avenue Kléber, but not Mansholt's, however. This confirmed my belief that a number of measures had been taken. That evening at the Precatlan I recall that, by chance, I met Jean-Marie Cavada who worked, I think, for some other chain, anyway, some friends, so, we had a drink together. And there was Léon Zitrone. I said: 'I am very pleased to meet you. This is what happened... There must have been some sort of problem with the cameras or something, because on the television news I watched the arrival of all the delegations and I was off-screen, but Sicco Mansholt climbed the stairs — yes, he was the President of the European Commission, and he was there — but there was nothing! There was no allusion made to this in any commentary.' I told him: 'I am somewhat mystified by this.' Léon Zitrone got on his high horse, without mentioning his other capacities, he let it be known that nobody could criticise him for anything whatsoever; he had the papers, the files, and so forth. 'Ah,' he said, 'but no one sent me Sicco Mansholt's biography.' 'So that is it.' I said. 'It is the fault of the Press Service of the Commission. You did not get Sicco Mansholt's biography; therefore, where French television is concerned, he does not exist.' This is just to illustrate the atmosphere possible in certain circumstances and that I had known some years earlier — we can talk about that if we have time — at The Hague, where Jean Rey was President.

Thus the lot of a spokesman is not a happy one, since you are fighting on two fronts: firstly, because you can never satisfy your boss. Just as a Minister in his home country wants to make the front page every morning, so a Member of the Commission would also like to do so from time to time — this is normal. Secondly, you cannot tell the journalists everything all the time in public, because negotiations are in course or because this is not opportune... So one must have the trust of the journalists and, most of the time, when the trust is there, they are aware of this; there are the rules of the game and you can, on occasions, prepare them beforehand, and say, for instance: 'So it is agreed then? It is impossible to print this right now, but you will be in the know when it all happens...' There was this possibility in what I might call this relationship of trust, in Brussels, where the accredited press had increased from ten to 20, from 20 to 80; it becomes all the more difficult when you cross a certain numeric threshold to have the same relationship with all the journalists, but the basic principle is never to spin them a yarn. What I mean by this is that if you do not tell them everything, they still respect you; but try to manipulate them, and you are sunk. Therefore I believe that if you know the rules of the game thoroughly, you can do a good job, and Sicco Mansholt understood this, which meant that he acted quite transparently during the short period that I worked with him and he kept me informed of everything. He even asked my advice: 'We are off to Paris. How shall we do it? Sort it out and then we'll see.' I think that this is the way to work, because journalists learn very quickly whether you have

the trust of the President or not, because if you go on about the weather or you try to be witty or quote Paul Valéry, Kant and other famous Europeans, that might work for five minutes, but then that's that.

So there you have the Paris Summit from this angle. I can remember Mansholt's attitude when he returned, for afterwards he gave what is described in poor French as a 'debriefing' in the pressroom, and going up in the Berlaimont lift with him I said: 'We have turned over a new page, but nonetheless we should learn some lessons from all this, and I have noticed that, regarding numbers of staff and so on...' I made a request to Mansholt saying that the Commission, which is often the scapegoat, must possess a minimum of means, both to defend itself and to explain; not just for public relations or propaganda purposes, naturally, but in order to inform. These days we talk of communication, which is a vague term. At that point Mansholt told me: 'You may, when the opportunity arises, put that in a speech.' He said to me: 'One of these days, I shall lose my temper and when they talk about budgetary issues' — this was usually in the autumn — 'I will tell the Council clearly: with regard to Council initiatives, Commission initiatives and, at some point, European institutions that want to advance in this or that direction; for its part, the Commission must be able to explain to our citizens what it is all about. Why? How? It must have the means to do so. What is more,' said Mansholt, 'I shall end my remarks by saying: 'If you will not give me the means, I shall refuse such initiatives or proposals for the reason that I shall not be able to put them into effect because I am unable to explain them.' So I must say that this parenthesis, which I experienced very directly with Sicco Mansholt, was, from the point of view of information, the press and public opinion, a most interesting one.