

Sicco Mansholt: farmer, resistance fighter and a true European



Sicco Mansholt 1908 - 1995

Sicco Mansholt was a farmer, a member of the Dutch resistance during the Second World War, a national politician and the first European Commissioner responsible for Agriculture. Mansholt's ideas laid the basis for the Common Agricultural Policy of the European Union, one of the most prominent policies since its founding days.

Having witnessed the horrors of the Dutch famine at the end of the Second World War, Mansholt was convinced that Europe needed to become self-sufficient and that a stable supply of affordable food should be guaranteed for all.

The most important element in Mansholt's plan for the early Common Agricultural Policy was to encourage productivity in agriculture. The policy implied systems where farmers were guaranteed a certain minimum price for their products, providing incentives for them to produce more. His pro-European determination and strong vision for the future, coupled with a will to build on a shared future, identified him as a true European during his lifetime.

Early life

Sicco Mansholt was born on 13 September 1908 in a socially-engaged family running a thriving farm in Groningen, a northern province of The Netherlands. His father was an active member of the Dutch socialist party and an important adviser to the party on agricultural matters. His mother, the daughter of a judge, was one of the first Dutch women to study political science at university and held frequent political gatherings for women.

After high school Mansholt wanted to become a farmer, but having already paid for the farming lease for his brother, Mansholt's father could not afford to pay for Sicco as well. Hoping nevertheless to carve out a career in agriculture, he went to the Dutch East Indies, now Indonesia, and began work on a tea plantation. He was however unable to get used to the colonial system there and moved back to the Netherlands in 1936. A year later he managed to obtain a plot of land in the polder region of Wieringermeer, married, and lived the life of a farmer until the outbreak of the Second World War.

Second World War

During the war Mansholt was an active member of the Dutch resistance against the Nazi-German invaders. In the early years he hid people on his farm and disseminated intelligence information, but later on he managed an extensive distribution network that provided food to people in hiding throughout the western parts of the country. After the war, as a testament to his experience, courage and organisational skills, he was offered the post of Minister of Agriculture, Fishery and Food Distribution in the new government. At 36 he became the youngest Minister in The Netherlands up to that point.

Restoring agriculture

Directly after the war, with a dire shortage of food and a crisis looming, Mansholt's post was of the greatest importance. He took a number of measures meant to restore food supplies quickly, but at the same time he understood

the need to modernise agriculture more profoundly in order to avoid future shortages and guarantee efficiency. He set minimum prices for the most important agricultural products combined with import taxes and support for exports. To promote productivity, he promoted investments in research, education and the merger of farms into bigger and more efficient units.

A Common Agricultural Policy for Europe

Being a convinced European federalist, Mansholt dreamt of a common agricultural policy for Europe. In 1950 he developed a plan for a common market for agricultural produce in Europe with a supranational governing structure. However, this plan proved to be too ambitious for its time and failed. However, it was later revived and formed the inspiration behind the agricultural policy of the European Economic Community.

After serving as a Minister for twelve and a half years, Mansholt got his chance to launch his plans for a common policy when he became Commissioner for Agriculture in the very first European Commission in 1958. The 1957 Treaty of Rome established the European Economic Community and provided for a common market in Europe to be set up in three four-year stages. This twelve-year plan was considered by many to be extremely ambitious and likely to fail, especially the measures relating to the agricultural sector, given the high level of opposition to them. However, Mansholt remained optimistic and went to work. His plans were to agree on a combination of direct subsidy payments for crops and land which might be cultivated with price support mechanisms, including guaranteed minimum prices as well as tariffs and quotas on imports of certain goods from third countries. This would encourage better agricultural productivity so that consumers had a stable supply of affordable food and ensure that the EU had a viable agricultural sector.

The Mansholt Plan

His plans initially met with a fair amount of opposition from farmers and their political representatives, who firmly believed

that this common approach would threaten their livelihood and that only the large farms would be able to survive. There were many obstacles to overcome on the way to agreeing a common European policy, but Mansholt persevered and in 1968 the Commission published the “Memorandum on the reform of the Common Agricultural Policy”, otherwise named the “Mansholt Plan”. Basically, the Plan declared that for agriculture to flourish, farmers needed to modernise. This would guarantee productivity and enable European farmers to become self-sufficient.

The agricultural policy was very successful in meeting its initial objective of making Europe more self-sufficient with food products. However, in the 50 years of its existence it has undergone major changes in order to adapt to new times. By the 1970s the policy had worked so well that there were often surpluses of farm produce. During the 1970s, Mansholt became a staunch defender of measures to protect the environment as a key element of agricultural policy. He was Vice-President of the Commission from 1958 to 1972 and its fourth President from 1972 until 1973.

Mansholt’s aim was to prevent a recurrence of the dreadful winter famine experienced by the people of Europe at the end of the Second World War. Mansholt’s Plan provided for the restoration of Europe’s self-sufficiency and a flourishing of European agriculture in an unprecedented short space of time.



As Commissioner for Agriculture and an enthusiastic farmer himself, Mansholt paved the way for the Common Agricultural Policy.