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Agricultural 'Tour de France'

"At one time we had 'agriculture marathons'. Now it's more like the Tour de France, where everything starts all over again each day." So Italian Communist Member of the European Parliament, Luigi Marras, summed up the situation in Luxembourg on Thursday, September 26, at the end of the Parliament's second emergency debate on agricultural prices within ten days.

The Parliament, indeed, found itself playing a particularly central role in the series of agricultural crises which hit the Community at the end of September. Amid threats by demonstrating farmers that the main roads to the Parliament building in Luxembourg would be blocked, it assembled in extraordinary session on the 16th to consider ways of preventing the collapse of farm incomes during the rest of the year to April 1975. The Council of Ministers was due to decide on emergency measures later in the week.

At the centre of the debate — which ran from just before three o'clock in the afternoon until after half past three the following morning — was the Commission's proposal for an 'across-the-board' increase of 4% in agricultural prices. For some, in the words of Irish DEP Member James Gibbons, these "feeble half-measures proposed by the Commission" were "too little and too late". "Deputies may have seen a small group of people picketing outside this building," he noted. They were from north-west Connaught and County Donegal, where "the price of a single calf at the present time can be as low as 50p". The leader of the Liberal Group, Jean Durieux, scathingly referred to "technocrats swarming in the swamp of Brussels, and growing pale over their statistics instead of perceiving the real agricultural situation". If the price rise were limited to 4%, there would be "terrible repercussions".

Others were worried about the effects on consumer prices even of this 4% — notably members of the Socialist Group. But the paradox of 50p calves in Connaught and £1 steaks in the shops caused a certain amount of reflection. "In France," Mr. Durieux had noted, "an animal on the hoof sells at eight francs a kilo. The consumer buys it at twenty-two francs." In any case, Nicola Cipolla noted for the Communists, of what use was a 4% increase in prices if a farmer couldn't sell 30 per cent of his crop?

"Wait till you can't get it!"

For the European Conservative Group, the main fault with the Commission proposal was that it was 'across-the-board'. James Scott-Hopkins was strongly of the opinion that the Commission should propose a differential price increase: under 1% for cereals and well over 4% for livestock. Peggy Fenner, in an assured maiden speech, emphasised that 4% was a "somewhat guesswork percentage". But confidence had to be restored in the farming industry. "If you believe that the housewife will grumble about the price of food, you wait until she cannot get it."

Despite the criticisms levelled at his proposal, however, it was Commissioner Lardinois who, in the course of two masterly replies to the debate, brought out the major cause of the trouble. The crisis of the Common Agricultural Policy was purely monetary: as long as exchange rates were fluctuating there would be dislocation.

By three in the morning, indeed, the Parliament had reached some very sensible decisions. A threatened procedural tangle was averted by a timely intervention from Mr. Scott-Hopkins; and the amendment eventually passed proposed a 6% price rise, but varied as between products. Not surprisingly, there was an atmosphere of a job well done as the British delegation took off from

Luxembourg at eight o'clock after catching a couple of hours sleep.

"Never a dull moment"

This atmosphere still prevailed on the following Tuesday when the Parliament reassembled in Luxembourg for its normal September session. On the Friday the Council of Ministers had eventually decided on 5% — Parliament could congratulate itself on having made its influence felt. Then, on the next day, came the news of the German Government's refusal to implement the agricultural package.

The Parliament was suddenly galvanised with anger. Two motions for an emergency debate that evening came before the House just before dinner and a suggestion by Ludwig Fellermaier, German vice-chairman of the Socialist Group, that there should be an intermission for political consultations produced the wrathful response from Irish DEP Member Michael Yeats that "we are making a fool of Parliament if we say that this is not an urgent matter". In the event, the calming effects of dinner and an announcement by the President that Commissioner Lardinois would be coming hot foot from Bonn on the following day averted another all-night agricultural sitting.

Commissioner Lardinois himself opened the debate on the following morning. In the field of agriculture, he noted — accurately sensing the mood of the House, which was at last in session in the middle of a Community crisis — there was "never a dull moment". Sometimes the problems came from one member state, sometimes from another; but the CAP was now really facing heavy weather.

The main effect of the speech, however, was reassuring. The Commissioner summarised the details of the German Government's position; and went on to remark that if their objective was to produce institutional reform, he was delighted. The

main problems, he reiterated, were monetary, not agricultural.

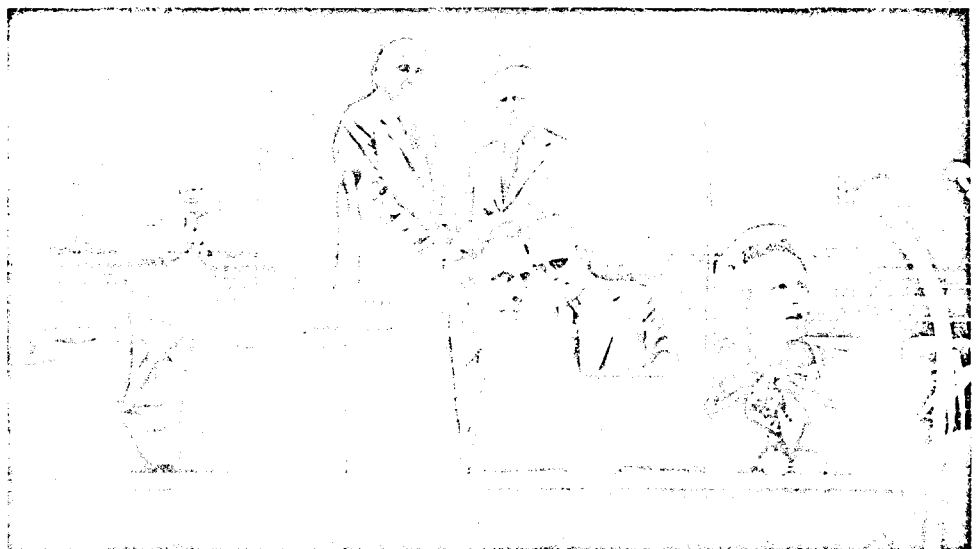
Oil on troubled waters

This constructive mood set by the Commissioner continued almost until the end. A motion by Belgian Christian-Democrat agricultural expert, Lucien Martens, appealing to the German Government to approve the agriculture package in return for future talks on CAP reform was supported by all political groups. Lord St. Oswald, for the Conservatives, wished to pour oil on the troubled waters mentioned by Commissioner Lardinois. The Germans had on this occasion put national above Community interests, "but what Government hasn't?" For the Socialists, Cornelis Laban (Netherlands) regretted the German action, though understanding their desire to reform the CAP.

Only the Irish Members — virtually every one of whom spoke — posed the awkward question of what was to be said to the angry farmers. "When I get off the plane this evening," David Thornley warned from the Socialist benches, "they will be there asking: what are you going to do now that Europe has failed?"; and for the Communists, Luigi Marras noted that "a basic renegotiation is now inevitable". No doubt these were two points which Mr. Destremaux, summing up for the Council of Ministers, had particularly in mind when he promised to report back to the Council on the following week.

Freedom of movement

Question time on Thursday 26th September gave Conservative Member Sir Douglas Dodds-Parker the opportunity to raise in the European Parliament the case of Susan Ballantine, the English girl imprisoned by the East Germans for trying to help her fiance escape to the West. Was it worth continuing discussions on freedom of movement at the European Security Conference he asked, when Communist countries were persecuting those who wished to leave? For the most part, the Parliament appeared to share Sir Douglas' scepticism.



Four new UK Members of the European Parliament took their seats on September 16. All members of the European Conservative Group they are (seated left to right): Hugh Dykes, Ralph Howell, Michael Shaw and Peggy Fenner. Behind, standing, Lord Gladwyn (Liberal) talks to the Secretary General of the European Conservative Group, Dunstan Curtis.

ending the Parliament's session on Tuesday 24th Commission President Ortolí saw the greatest anger facing Europe as a progressive substitution of the idea of "cooperation" for the idea of "Community". Common policies were the heart of the Community: the development of intergovernmental action, whilst sometimes useful and giving the illusion of progress, could only spell ambiguity and weakness for Europe. A second factor was the blocking of the Community's decision-making mechanism — largely the result of the need for unanimity even in questions of detail. These problems were compounded by the present lack of progress in the development of the Community, particularly in the direction of regional and energy policy. This progress needed not so much the inspiration, ingenuity and competence of the Commission — "the proposers"; rather it required fundamental agreement on long-term objectives and political will on the part of the "deciders" — the member states. And "no lasting progress will be made without a strong institutional structure; this rules out the ceding of responsibilities to intergovernmental mechanisms".

This brought agreement and support from speakers from all political groups. Lord Gladwyn (Liberal) said that the blame for the present impasse in the construction of Europe "rests purely with the Council and it rests with nobody else". His suggestion for overcoming the problem was that in the "all too likely" event of the Council reaching an impasse it should hold a public debate. "This should show who exactly are objecting to this proposal or to that, and bring it out into the open, instead of dealing with it in state secrecy on a basis of national interest and nothing else". If the Council couldn't agree to this it should take part in a debate in the Parliament — "come here and argue the case" challenged Lord Gladwyn, "have it out. Lance the abscess." "If we put that up calmly as a solution to the Ministers," he told the House, "in a few months' time, when the situation gets absolutely desperate, as it will, they might even agree."

Transport policy emerging

One of the most impressive Parliamentary reports to appear for some time came before the House for debate on Wednesday, September 25 — as it happened, the birthday of the rapporteur, Heinz Mursch (Christian Democrat, Germany). It covered the principles of a Common Transport Policy for the Community, and included a fifty-page explanatory statement which, in the words of Lord Bessborough who spoke for the Conservative Group, "may prove a most valuable summary for all those concerned with this question".

The key contention of the report is, as Mr. Mursch himself told the Parliament, that "the policy hitherto followed of 'little steps' has failed". The aim of a Common Transport Policy should therefore be to provide "an overall plan of all methods of transport and their infrastructures".

Moreover, as the report notes at the beginning, "neither the public nor politicians are sufficiently aware of the great importance of transport for our economic progress . . ." Distorted transport costs can restrict trade even more effectively than tariffs. "The public has now become so accustomed to the enormous deficits on the railways that many people consider them normal. But they are not normal! They are the expression of an incredible distortion of our economy and an incredible misdirection of economic forces."

Free choice for consumers between different methods of transport, and an undistorted pricing policy — including the pricing of infrastructures — are indeed two of Mursch's central principles. Harmonisation of Member States' transport policies was not an end in itself; but it was necessary "to create as free a common transport market as possible".

The report's conclusions were that such a policy should be implemented in two stages: the first running to 1977, the second from then onwards. "We in our group," Lord Bessborough told the Parliament, "have some doubt whether the target dates proposed represent realistic estimates of

actually achieve." Only the Commission did, however, opposed the policy itself. As Commissioner Scarascia Mugnozza told the Parliament at the end of the debate, "the Common Transport Policy is beginning to emerge".

Greece — ending the freeze

Speakers from several party groups — including Lady Elles for the Conservatives — called for the unfreezing of the association agreement with Greece in Parliament on Thursday (26th) afternoon. A report by Peter Corterier (Socialist, Germany) welcomed the replacement in Greece of a military regime by a civilian government and looked forward to the reestablishment of full parliamentary democracy, and this sentiment was echoed by speakers from all round the House. Some speakers, including Commissioner Gundelach and Hans Jahn (Christian Democrat, Germany) struck a note of caution, suggesting that the Community wait until after the November Greek elections before taking up further questions such as accelerating, at Greece's request, the eventual transition to full Community membership.

Cyprus — next door

Both Greece and Turkey aspire to the political objective of full membership of the Community, Ludwig Fellermaier (Socialist, Germany) reminded Parliament in a debate on Cyprus on September 26. Shouldn't the Community have a more positive attitude to the Cyprus situation? He recalled how, the week before (September 16-20) at a meeting between Members of the European Parliament and US Congress, one Congressman had commented "we as Americans are a long way from Cyprus; you, however, in the European Community, are next door". Several speakers including Hans Jahn (Christian Democrat, Germany) called for Council of Association meetings. Sir Douglas Dodds-Parker (Conservative, UK) thought the Cyprus crisis was a good example of where the existence of a political secretariat would have helped the Community to handle the problem more effectively. The Council would be expected to report back to Parliament on the general situation and such problems as refugees and resettlement in the October plenary session.

A shot across the bows

The report on rules of procedure for considering the Community's draft budget for 1975 — proposed by the new leader of the Socialist group, Georges Spénale — did not take up much of the Parliament's time when it came up on Wednesday 25th September. As the proposer noted, it was of an essentially technical nature; and only Lord Bessborough for the Conservative group intervened before its adoption to note that there was still considerable scope for developing budgetary procedures along the lines to be suggested in a report by Conservative leader Peter Kirk.

Beneath this calm exterior, however, unrest was brewing; and it came to the surface at a special press conference given by the Parliament's President, Cornelis Berkhouwer.

Despite the debate on procedure, he noted, and despite the undertakings which had repeatedly been given, the Council of Ministers had still not finally ceded the agreed budgetary powers to the Parliament. "If we do not get these powers before the end of the year," he warned, "it will be our duty to provoke a grave institutional crisis."

What would this be? "We have our ideas," replied the President. Clearly, he hinted, one possibility was to sack the entire Commission, another to reject what it could of the Community budget. But were these threats credible? Yes, indeed, replied the President. "The temperature in this Parliament is mounting. There is a majority there for both these courses of action." There were, however, other possibilities: "We can do everything as a Parliament which is not forbidden to us." The purpose of his statement was not to add to the Community's difficulties but was a "shot across the bows" of the Council and, behind them, of the Member Governments.

All the political parties contesting the October 10 General Election refer to the European Community — the Conservatives and Liberals with some enthusiasm, the Labour Party with more circumspection, while the Communists', the National Front's and the Scottish and Welsh Nationalists' views range from the outright hostile to the cautious.

The Conservatives, Liberals and Plaid Cymru also refer to the European Parliament. The Conservative manifesto proclaims that "Conservatives have been playing their full part in the European Parliament to protect British interests, improve Community policy and make Europe more democratic". A further Conservative reference comes in the context of a proposed Speaker's Conference on Electoral Reform: "In addition to considering our present voting system and alternatives, we would like the Speaker's Conference to examine the question of representation in the European Parliament, which many people think should be decided by direct election."

The last comment appears very lukewarm, indeed surprising, given that the Rome Treaty, which was accepted by Britain under the last Conservative Government, includes a specific commitment that — admittedly at an unspecified time — the European Parliament shall be elected by direct universal suffrage.

The Liberals' enthusiasm for direct elections seems unalloyed, though significantly it follows a passage warning against the dangers of the people becoming alienated from government. "A similar feeling of antipathy will soon be felt towards the European Communities unless there are direct elections to the European Parliament. This has been part of Liberal policy for a very long time and a government-led initiative would help restore confidence in the European idea as well as being an indication of continued faith in our membership of the Community."

Plaid Cymru states that Plaid "is, and always, has been opposed to membership of the EEC . . ."; but, unlike Labour, it also refers to being "represented in the Market institutions," through a Welsh Parliament. In particular, it believes that such a Parliament is needed "to nominate Welsh members to the European Assembly".

Red tape

Where can you avoid red tape when there are several thousand civil servants together? The answer, according to Commissioner Lardinois and Parliament Vice-President Lord Bessborough (Conservative, UK) is in the Commission. Both argued strongly that recent attacks on the Commission were totally unmerited. In fact, Lord Bessborough pointed out, the Commission, serving some 250 million people in the Community had 600 fewer civil servants than the Scottish Office which serves a population of only 5 million. Commissioner Lardinois told the House that compared with his former 12,000 strong national Department of Agriculture in The Hague, in the Commission he had only 580 staff — including secretaries and drivers — to handle the running of the Common Agricultural Policy.

Tailpiece

David Thornley (Socialist, Ireland) . . . "Like every other member of the European Parliament, I consider myself an exceptionally gifted person. I am a professor of Political Science in my own country and I know everything that needs to be known about political science from Socrates to Robert A. Dahl. I have also written works on the history of working class movements in 19th and 20th century Ireland and, finally, I consider myself the greatest living authority on the history of Italian operatic tenor singing. As a reward for these qualifications I was appointed rapporteur on eels. Now, I only ate a piece of an eel once in my life at the age of 8 and never intend to repeat the experience; and if an eel were to undulate, I think that is the correct word, into this Chamber at the moment, I would undulate out of it as far as I possibly could."