



Source: Mansholt, 23 October 2012,
European Union, 2026, photographer
Marcelle Jamar

MANSHOLT, Sicco Leendert

Dutch politician and fourth President of the Commission of the European Community (EC) 1972-1973

By **Bob Reinalda** · Version 5 June 2013

Was born 13 September 1908 in Ulrum and passed away 29 June 1995 in Wapserveen, the Netherlands. He was the son of Lambertus Helbrig Mansholt, farmer and member of the Provincial Executive, and Wabina Andreae, teacher and political activist. On 17 January 1938 he married Hendrika Johanna Postel (called Henny), teacher. They had two daughters and two sons.

On film: <http://ec.europa.eu/avservices/video/player.cfm?ref=1072853>

Biography

Mansholt's grandparents and parents were farmers in the northern province of Groningen who were actively engaged in the progressive Social-Democratic Labour Party and sought to treat their labourers well. They argued, following the thought of American political economist Henry George, that society should share the economic rent of land, rather than the land being owned privately. Due to disagreement among the children, their sizeable farm had to be sold when the grandfather died in 1921. The parents moved to a villa and were able to afford a motorboat and a Buick. Both encouraged Mansholt's interest in understanding the functioning of engines. The parents did not force their opinions on their five children, two girls and three boys, but made them aware of their compassion for people in need and the struggle for a 'better' society. At secondary school Mansholt's poor results caused him to repeat two classes before graduating in 1927. He moved to the Secondary

Colonial Agricultural College in Deventer, where he lived in lodgings during three years, spending the holidays with his parents. His plan to leave for the Dutch colonies in Indonesia as a tobacco planter had to be postponed due to the economic crisis. He worked as a mechanic in a garage and as a volunteer laboratory assistant in a state experimental farm. In 1933 he had an internship in a cheese factory and then became a temporary employee in the supervisory department of the Government Bureau that monitored the implementation of the 1931 Wheat Act. In March 1934 he was able to travel to Indonesia, where he supervised the work on a tea plantation on West Java. He did his work properly, but his position became complicated since he admired the culture of the native labourers and condemned their poor living and working conditions, including the lower payment of women. He also disliked the rise of Fascist ideas as encouraged by some authorities. His political awareness grew, and in letters to his parents he discussed whether it would be better to openly express his political convictions, which, however, would frustrate his career. In the summer of 1935 he decided to return to the Netherlands where he could be frank about convictions and become a farmer if he could win a plot in the newly drained lake Wieringermeer. His father had mentioned this opportunity. He liked it that the public polder authority also managed the infrastructure and cultivation of the new land. In January 1936 Mansholt handed in his resignation and, after touring Java and Sumatra, returned to the Netherlands. Experience and being married were among the selection criteria of tenant farmers in the model polder. Mansholt gained experience by working at his brother's farm, also in the Wieringermeer, while an aunt arranged the latter. As head of a training college for domestic economics teachers she suggested Henny Pontel as fiancée. The two liked each other immediately, were assigned a farm in late 1937, married and soon had children.

The use of tractors, at the time unusual in the Netherlands, was efficient but caused Mansholt to lose some of his hearing. His farm did well because farmers were provided with a constant flow of information about improving agriculture and working methods. On a suggestion by the agricultural trade union, Mansholt and his brother joined the agricultural employers' association. In 1938 Mansholt engaged in local politics, arguing in favour of small farmers and the setting up of a municipal council. He soon became the Social-Democratic representative in the polder, was well acquainted with some important Social Democrats, also through his parents' connections, and understood what was going on politically. He began to develop his own ideas by criticizing the party's official farming policies, focusing on more help for small farmers and a larger role of government in regulating farming production. After the German occupation of the Netherlands in May 1940 Mansholt belonged to a group of young Social Democrats who met secretly to exchange ideas. He created safe spaces in his farm and helped people in hiding at his and other reliable farms when the Germans began to arrest Jews and Social Democrats. Later on he became involved in the transport of weapons that allied aircraft dropped for the resistance movement. Mansholt managed to take care of transport permits, carefully hiding the weapons under his produce. He acted as a buyer and a transporter of food, opposing the black market by trying to buy and sell at normal prices. He also kept his political contacts elsewhere and often was away from home. He was at home when the Germans flooded the polder by blowing up the dikes in April 1945. He cycled out to call on people who lived on isolated farms and managed to escape both the rising water and the Germans, who lost the war a few weeks later. In his own words, Mansholt went into the war, 'bursting with aggression and radical ideas', but the years of occupation and resistance matured him, both politically and emotionally, and formed his administrative skills (Van Merriënboer 2011, 160).

On Liberation Day, 5 May 1945, Mansholt was made acting mayor of the Wieringermeer, but three weeks later the prime minister offered him the post of Minister of Food Supply, Agriculture and Fishery, who had to arrange that the Dutch had enough to eat following the 'famine winter' period of 1944-1945. He felt he could not reject the offer and regarded the job as continuation of what he had done during the occupation. As a minister he managed to buy food outside of the country, transport it into the country and see to it that the citizens got their rations by virtue of their food coupons. He set up price controls and a supervisory body, fought against profiteers and acquired the support of the farmers by promising fair prices and that they could find him if times were to get worse. He not only

regulated pricing, but also production and processing as well as imports and exports, with agricultural products being almost half of the Dutch exports. He did this in close cooperation with the farming organizations. In October 1945 he attended the first conference of the Food and Agricultural Organization (FAO) in Quebec, Canada. He was a member of the General Committee and raised the issue of a growing world population and food shortage as an ongoing race. He argued that the FAO should create a balanced international food market and was willing to play an active role in the organization. His Director-General at the ministry (and cousin) Stefan Louwes was temporarily seconded to FAO Director-General John Boyd Orr, which meant that Mansholt remained well informed about what happened within the organization. Mansholt clashed with the Combined Food Board in Washington DC, because for the American government, which controlled the Board, economic and political motives were becoming stronger than humanitarian ones. In Washington he could not always get what he wanted for the Netherlands, but he disliked that prices rose when the United States (US) ended price controls for meat in late 1946 and he noticed that American and Canadian farmers stockpiled their grain, expecting prices to rise. He therefore supported Orr's proposal for a World Food Board, but they found the Americans and British pressing for free trade. Mansholt reneged his original intention to return to farming after two years and served as Dutch Minister of Agriculture in six governments until 1958. Within the cabinet colleagues respected but also feared him, given his strong financial demands, his unwavering attitude in discussions, and his ability to stand up to long-lasting marathon sessions on the budget. In public he defended his food rationing policies wherever he could and he attempted to remove price controls and to liberalize the market as far as world market conditions allowed, but had to recognize that these went slower than expected. Although his policy helped Dutch agriculture to recover and flourish, he faced many detractors, including farmers who disliked the controls and supervision. His policy of gradual and gentle replacement of small, unprofitable farms by larger, profitable ones met with strong resistance too, particularly by Christian Democrats who regarded the small farmers a bulwark of Church and State, while Mansholt regarded it 'as socially irresponsible to keep unprofitable farms afloat at the expense of the community' (Van Merriënboer 2009, 183).

Given the high food prices on the world market and the balance-of-payments problems of Western European countries Mansholt presented a blueprint for European cooperation in the field of agriculture in October 1950, based on efficiency, rationalization and specialization and also meant to acquire a stronger position *vis-à-vis* the US. Although Mansholt used his European plan to serve Dutch interests as well as a lever in domestic politics, he went along with Jean Monnet's European efforts and once he had the support of the Dutch, he tried to gain support from other countries. Since he regarded the Council of Europe and the Organization for European Economic Cooperation as organizations with too many members, he focused on the European Coal and Steel Community of six states, by promoting agricultural integration as part of a more general economic integration on a supranational basis. In spite of French support and his strong international engagement in 1952 and 1953, his so-called Green Pool plan failed, as the Belgians and Germans did not support him. Mansholt refused to give up, but was prepared to compromise and continued to gain support for what would become the common agricultural policy (CAP). He played an active role in the 'relaunch' of European integration as promoted by the Dutch and Belgian Foreign Ministers Jan Willem Beyen and Paul Henri Spaak. The so-called Spaak Report of June 1956 stipulated that agriculture would be part of the integration process. At the same time Mansholt was in the running for the position of FAO Director-General, but Binay Sen of India was elected with 42 votes, against 29 for Mansholt. In the negotiations that led to the 1957 Treaty of Rome Mansholt favoured a strong Commission in the European Economic Community (EEC) and made sure that both the objectives and procedures to implement the CAP were laid out in the Treaty. By now, his domestic position was criticized because his policies were costly and had resulted in export surpluses. The Dutch government considered him an ideal candidate for the Commission, which was to start in January 1958. A move to have him appointed Commission President was vetoed by the West-German Chancellor Konrad Adenauer, who considered a farmer and a Socialist to be 'too much for one man' (Van der Harst 2007, 166).

In Brussels the Commissioners had to set up everything from scratch. They still had to assign tasks, work out procedures and install an administration. For his Directorate-General VI (Agriculture) Mansholt looked for the best possible functionaries and was the only one to appoint a non-compatriot (a Frenchman) to his cabinet. He was in favour of small teams that got together at a round table every week. He proved demanding and not easy to work with, as he was impatient and not always diplomatic, testing his policy through constant discussion. Sticking to the main lines of his policy, he left the details to his aides, among them his *chef de cabinet* Alfred Mozer, but if necessary during marathon negotiations or when forging package deals he had the details available and elaborated them joyfully. He forced himself to learn French and after three months was able to express himself adequately. The CAP was to dominate the weekly meetings of the Commission during five years, with Mansholt, who also was Vice-President of the Commission, as the man who knew what he wanted and understood how to play politics by attracting enough support and negotiating smartly. For agriculture he focused on the creation of a single market with uniform prices and used subsidy payments for crops and land, price support mechanisms, including minimum prices, and tariffs and quotas on imports of certain goods from third countries to improve agricultural productivity, aware that these were to incite farmers to produce ever more. During the first stage of European integration (1958-1962) Mansholt was the man who formulated the CAP, with the ministers of agriculture playing a subordinate role. He invited the main farming organizations of the member-states to unite into a European organization and frequently visited the member-states to defend the common policy. His message that many small and inefficient farmers had to disappear in order to make the agricultural sector healthy created a strong counter-movement in West Germany, while it was received with understanding in the other states. In 1960 he attracted support from the Council of Ministers (not from the Commission) for his idea of linking the promotion of modern agriculture with an accelerated reduction of customs duties on industrial products and also for the proposed system of tariffs. The European Parliament had agreed on the tariffs as well, with a majority in favour of prices at the highest (i.e. West-German) level, notwithstanding Mansholt's warning that these would lead to enormous surpluses. The first marathon session took place in December 1961, resulting from the end-of-the-first-phase deadline of 31 December built into the Treaty. Mansholt was in full control. The clock was stopped and in the night of 14 January after more than 130 hours of negotiation he solved the deadlock by requesting an adjournment of an hour and a half. He returned with a package that had something for each minister to take home but, as he declared, was not open to further negotiation. Early in the morning, looking as if he had had slept well, he gave a press conference that the proposal was accepted unanimously. This result launched the CAP and allowed the EEC to start its second phase of integration.

Although France was the main supporter of his agricultural policy, Mansholt strongly disagreed with the new French President Charles de Gaulle. He regarded his intergovernmental vision of European political cooperation as an attempt to limit the scope of the envisaged European integration. He openly criticized him in a speech in May 1962 and when de Gaulle vetoed British accession to the EEC in January 1963 Mansholt arranged, in order to prevent the Commission from being blamed and in fact together with the French Minister of Agriculture Edgard Pisani, that the talks with the British on agriculture were rounded off successfully and then condemned de Gaulle's veto publicly. He immediately began to look for support in the other member-states and also visited the US, where he talked to President John F. Kennedy about European developments and the position of France on 9 April 1963. They agreed on a way to promote the CAP through the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT) negotiations, which in fact was a subtle way of pressuring Germany, because the US declared that it would not engage in tariff reductions on industrial products if the EEC adopted a restrictive trade policy on agriculture. Kennedy and Mansholt got along well and Mansholt successfully advised Kennedy on how to address the Germans during his visit to Germany in June. Mansholt's support for an extension of the European Parliament's powers in order to place the CAP in a democratic framework and the Commission's acting on its own authority, resulting in political and budget proposals related to the CAP, irritated de Gaulle, who in July 1965 boycotted the European institutions. The 'Empty Chair' crisis was an attempt to halt the increasing influence of the

Commission with members like Mansholt. It was not resolved until the 'Luxemburg Compromise' of January 1966, which ended a period of stagnation in European decision making. De Gaulle had overplayed his hand and Mansholt saw himself confronted with new political relations (national interests dominating, rather than a European spirit), in which he had less supporters. Nonetheless, he decided to remain and continue the work for 'his' CAP. But a few months later he could not work for half a year due to acute peritonitis, probably the result of working too long under too high pressure. When the three Communities merged in July 1967 to form the European Community (EC), the Dutch nominated Mansholt as Commission President, knowing that the French would not accept this. Mansholt, however, continued as Vice-President.

With the common markets for agricultural products coming into force in 1967 and 1968, the market issues on which Mansholt had focused were no longer the essence but rather the structure of the farming industry. In a memorandum on the reform of the CAP, which the Commission published in 1968 and that became known as the 'Mansholt Plan', Mansholt argued that farmers needed to modernise and that the traditional family farm had no future. During the two years that he travelled across the EC to defend this policy, German farmers called him the 'farmers' killer' and in many large demonstrations he was hanged symbolically. A decision on structural policy was made in 1970, although in a strongly watered-down form. By now Mansholt was aware of the overproduction that had resulted from his policies and worried about the North-South divide. Strongly influenced by an advance copy of the Club of Rome's report *The Limits to Growth*, he gave a speech in September 1971 in which he discussed population growth, the power of multinational companies and environmental pollution, wondering whether 'old Socialism' could handle these issues or whether a new Marx was needed. While he did not meet with much approval within the Commission, he had struck a chord with young people, many of whom were revolting at the time.

When Commission President Franco Malfatti resigned on 17 March 1972 to return to Italian politics, Mansholt became President at the suggestion of France, probably a tactical move, knowing that it would be a job for only eight months, and a goodwill gesture towards the United Kingdom (UK). Mansholt attended the third United Nations Conference on Trade and Development in Santiago, Chile, where he discovered that the EC member-states did not agree and did not try to meet the needs of the South. Back in Brussels he received the Commission's support to take some risks and returned to Santiago, where he supported the Southern wish for international commodity agreements and involvement of the South in trade conferences. He also prevented a resolution that opposed the EC's expansion with three new member-states in January 1973. Back home Mansholt also spoke out on East-West relations, criticizing the US for not being concerned about the North-South divide, much to the dislike of US President Richard Nixon, who in a document referred to him as 'that jackass' in the European Commission (Van Merriënboer 2011, 559). Mansholt set his hopes for a stronger EC on the summit of heads of government and state in Paris in October 1972, also attended by Denmark, Ireland and the UK. The summit added several policy areas to the Treaty of Rome and decided in principle on a monetary union, but Georges Pompidou, Willy Brandt and Edward Heath torpedoed all of Mansholt's pleas for more development aid, a more lenient attitude of the North within the GATT and more involvement of citizens with the EC. Mansholt regarded the summit as one full of missed opportunities. The fact that the summit conclusions were not followed by deeds for many years confirmed this opinion.

When his brief term as President ended, Mansholt left the Commission on 5 January 1973 and returned to Wapserveen, where he had bought an old farmhouse. He was often invited by the media to give his opinion and, missing his staff, hired a secretary. In the summer he fell in love with German Petra Kelly, then 23 years old and he 63, who had worked as an intern at the Commission's secretariat and had seen the funding of her research project cut as she was too critical of the EC, while Mansholt appreciated her criticisms. The affair started in New York and was widely known because the two attended conferences together, but they decided to end the affair in December 1974. Mansholt returned to his wife. He continued his passion for sailing and for years enjoyed working behind his

house on a boat that he could sail single-handed across the open seas. In 1982 he set sail for Brazil. Mansholt, who had always been a political Commissioner and strongly aware of power politics, maintained his contacts with many politicians and spoke out in countless speeches and interviews about the issues that kept worrying him before his death in 1995.

Archives

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