

Of Farmers and Journalists

Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is a great pleasure for me to talk to you today on behalf of the daily press. I don't have an agricultural background or training but now and again I write about agriculture in the *Neue Zürcher Zeitung*, one of the leading daily newspapers in the German-speaking world. For this reason, the organisers of the congress asked me to talk about how agriculture obtains coverage in the media. This is a question that many PR specialists all over the world who want to get media coverage – as positive as possible, of course – for their organisation or office ask themselves. There is no simple answer since it depends on a whole variety of factors. But one thing is certain as far as Switzerland is concerned: Swiss farmers are very good on the public relations side, as can be seen from the amount of coverage of agriculture in the daily press and on radio and television. On the whole the mass media have a positive, friendly attitude towards agriculture. Through my profession I come into contact a good deal with PR people in the business sector and in politics and I am always advising them to follow the example of farmers. The Farmers' Union, for example, deals swiftly, professionally and credibly with the media, and journalists from daily papers, who are always under pressure to meet deadlines and are therefore often not able to gain a deep insight into the details of agricultural issues, are extremely grateful. The Agricultural Information Service is also a high-quality organisation which makes a journalist's work a lot easier. For me it is an essential working tool.

Nevertheless, I have noticed that coverage of agriculture is changing in the daily and weekly newspapers. Let me give you an example. Imagine that the farmers have organised a demonstration and that hardly a single journalist goes out to cover it. This isn't fiction but reality; it was the case for the so-called Norwegian march in July this year. When a small group of Norwegian farmers marched to Geneva to demonstrate about certain issues at the WTO headquarters they naturally had to cross Swiss territory. The Swiss Farmers' Union organised no less than five press conferences over a period of seven days. The agricultural press gave the event good coverage. But the Swiss daily press was only vaguely interested, although the Doha Round – if it ever reaches a conclusion, which is doubtful – could in fact have dramatic consequences for farmers, in particular in wealthy countries such as Norway and Switzerland. You would hardly believe how difficult it was to find a press agency that had any pictures of the Norwegian march. Press photographers just didn't turn up. Even on the internet, at Google for example, there was hardly any coverage. There were one or two brief reports, but the media interest was so poor that even the editor of a weekly magazine was surprised. In Switzerland we are just not used to such reticence when agriculture is at stake. So what happened?

This question can best be answered by examining the relationship between journalists and agriculture (I'm talking here explicitly not about agricultural journalists). Here, in my opinion, there has been a change in values. An example from my own newspaper illustrates my point. Some time ago, at a meeting of the Zurich Journalists' Association, of which I was once President, I met a former colleague who has been retired for quite a while. We got talking about our very different careers. My colleague had left grammar school during the war and intended to go to university to study law, which he in fact later did. But before he went to university, did his degree and finally became editor of the NZZ he worked on a farm and even ran his own farm for a few years. I asked him why he had done that. He explained his time in agriculture by saying that he wanted to do something for his country. It was during the Second World War and the government had called for a so-called cultivation battle, the agricultural pillar of the country's spiritual defence that exemplified the legendary image of a small armed, neutral and self-sufficient country. It is clear that my colleague's first-hand experience in agriculture affected his subsequent attitude to farmers and thus to journalists' reports concerning the agricultural sector.

When I asked my team in the economic affairs department what they think of farmers they were not very complimentary: old-fashioned, grabbing, constantly complaining, always against any sort of reforms, gobbling up public subsidies. Not one colleague saw farmers as businessmen. The agricultural idyll that was promoted in Switzerland for political reasons in the second half of the 19th century has lost a good deal of its gloss. For many journalists and representatives of the business sector and academics who publish articles in the mass media there is not much left of the spirit of national defence. In many places a page has been turned:

it is no longer the farmer who feeds the population but the exact opposite – the taxpayer who feeds the farmer through the unshakeably high subsidies he receives. People are becoming increasingly aware that Switzerland has not become a rich country through the efforts of the farmers. But as I have already said, the overriding image of agriculture is still positive. For example on television, which is partly state-owned, and in particularly rural cantons such as Berne for example, the press shows a lot of understanding for farmers' demands. But I have noticed that the farmers have been increasingly forced into a defensive position. Farming subsidies are no longer sacrosanct – neither for the media nor the Minister of Finance – but have become a subject for debate in political circles and in the media. In my opinion, this debate is likely to become more heated as the economic environment becomes more difficult for everyone and cuts in state funding become more common. We are going to have to deal with the effects of fighting for a piece of the state's financial pie.

Logically it is public opinion that reflects the way the media report. How has public opinion concerning agriculture changed in recent times? A search through our archives reveals that ten years ago one in four people in Switzerland considered agriculture as too expensive. Today over half the population are of that opinion! In another large-scale survey the population was asked where, in view of the poor state of the federal coffers, they would most like savings to be made. Their answer was the armed forces and agriculture. Farmers take note! Agriculture is becoming increasingly dependent on the benevolence of the tax-payer and for this reason should not be getting bad press. If Swiss farmers accepted the idea of a milk strike, for example, which is being touted by some farmers' splinter groups in Europe at present, they would be shooting themselves in the foot. Believe me, press coverage would be very bad and would damage the whole of the agricultural sector. Farmers need to understand that they must cultivate a good relationship not only with consumers but also tax-payers. In future, Swiss tax-payers – and journalists – will only agree to high subsidies for farmers if they can see a genuine added value in Swiss products. I shall come back to this question later. In my opinion, we are seeing a major change in basic theory at the moment: for the first time since the Second World War farmers in Switzerland cannot automatically count on majority approval for their demands – neither in political circles nor in the media nor among the population.

This is a new experience for them. They have to learn how to accept it. And so far I don't think that the learning process has got very far. Farmers are often irritated, offended and unprofessional, and it must be said even aggressive if they are criticised from outside – they see all criticism as an attack. If anyone, be they a journalist, a representative of the business sector or an academic, criticises the agricultural sector and for example urges faster reform, they can count on a negative reaction. Believe me, I know what I'm talking about. I think that such bad reactions have become increasingly common over the past few years. They often appear in the form of articles in the agricultural press. Such reactions are not a sign of being able to take criticism. On the contrary, they add fuel to the critics' fire. Normally a person who reacts aggressively does so from a position of weakness. And that is something journalists like to see since it gives them the opportunity and justification to add salt to the wound. As I have already mentioned, many journalists from the mass media have too little time to gain specific knowledge about certain fields. After all, they are not specialised journalists. They rush from one event to another, they often have only a couple of hours to complete their report, they are writing about farmers today, crèches the next day and a state visit the day after. It is not only the journalists' fault; they would often like to have more time. It's often the fault of the publishers who want to have even hotter and even more fascinating stories even more quickly than their competitors. Which brings us to the quality of journalism. The question of the quality of journalism is ever-present and concerns all domains, but as far as agriculture is concerned there is an aggravating factor. Agricultural policy is extremely technical and complicated. Take for example all the different mathematical formulae connected with the abolition of customs duties under the WTO regulations. How can we possibly be expected to form an opinion if even the experts, negotiators and ministers are confused? It is obvious that journalists are bound to look around for a simple and easy approach to the issue. A tear-jerking story about farmers giving up their farms here, a heart-rending article about messy castration of young pigs there; I have even read an article which lamented the end of farming in the first half and called for structural changes in agriculture in the second half.

Journalists' approach to agro-political issues is often emotional. This can be an advantage as well as a disadvantage for agriculture. In Europe, animal protection issues, for example, are highly likely to hit consumers of the media and food below the belt. Take, for example, a television documentary on one of the EU's largest abattoirs and markets for slaughter cattle that was shown on Belgian television a few years ago. The awful scenes that were shown of animals suffering led to a dramatic fall in the consumption of meat in Belgium. Naturally to the disadvantage of farmers. For this reason I have never really understood why farmers' associations in a country like Switzerland no longer get involved in animal protection but even fight against it; animal protection issues are bound to give agriculture a bad image. And that is especially dangerous if agriculture is highly dependent on the goodwill of the tax-payer and agricultural products are expensive, as is the case in Switzerland.

We must assume that there is a limit to how much the tax-payer is prepared to subsidise agriculture. Today, ensuring that the nation will be fed is not the main problem in Western Europe as it was 60 years ago. On the contrary, we are all eating too much. In Switzerland too, one school-age child in five is overweight and the first cases of children with fatty infiltration of the liver have already been diagnosed. Humanity has never seen such a phenomenon before. The present generation is facing some enormous challenges: the ageing population and the rapid increase in expenditure on social insurance are only two of the Herculean tasks that it has to deal with. Moreover, it is especially the urban centres – which are of course the real engines of the economy – that are having to find solutions to serious problems. Take for example the growing number of working poor who live in small apartments and can't manage to make ends meet despite having a full-time breadwinner in the family. How can you plausibly explain to such a family that a farmer should receive a new premium just for keeping a milking cow? How do you explain to a single parent why the state subsidises fruit trees but should not be spending any money on crèches in the cities? What do you say to a worker who lost everything when the milk-processing company Swiss Dairy Food went bankrupt in 2002 while its suppliers – i.e. farmers – received Fr. 63 million as compensation for their loss of income? And when the farmers' associations complain through the media that it is a scandal how little consumers pay for food and that they should be prepared to pay a bit more, it is an unreasonable demand for people on low incomes who work just as hard as farmers and don't receive any subsidies.

Farmers are going to have to learn to show more solidarity with urban populations, especially as they demand that other people show solidarity with them. In Switzerland, the result of the popular vote on financial adjustment between the cantons at least gave an indication that there is a limit to the solidarity of those who provide the funds – i.e. the urban populations.

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