

WHO RUNS THE CAP?

How the EU's Agriculture Council is dominated by farmers, farm lobbyists and agribusiness.

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They say there's no substitute for experience – especially in politics. All governments like to appoint ministers with relevant experience. And understandably so. Giving a ministerial portfolio to someone who's got a strong background in the relevant policy area may make perfect sense. It can bring a fresh injection of expertise, know-how, understanding and even compassion. It plays well in the media and reassures voters. But it can also backfire. "Experienced" ministers can have a blinkered world-view and fixed opinions, and find it difficult to identify the public interest over and above the interests of competing lobbies. Instead of new ideas and a fresh perspective, we get "business as usual". Worse still, the revolving door between government, business and lobbying raises suspicions of undue influence, nepotism and conflicts of interest.

The common agricultural policy (CAP) costs every European citizen €100 a year in taxes and impacts countless aspects of our lives, from the food we eat to the environment we live in, the economic vitality of rural regions and the prosperity of developing countries. Four out of every ten euros spent by the EU is spent on the CAP. In short, the CAP matters. Yet in its current form, the CAP exists primarily as a tool for putting money – European taxpayers' money – into the hands of farmers and landowners. The CAP's annual €40 billion of direct aids, for example, are nothing more than a system for delivering taxpayer's money directly to farm businesses, with as few strings as possible. No clear objectives, no targets, no indicators of success, no policy outcomes necessary.

The big decisions on the CAP are taken by the 27 national farm ministers at their monthly behind-closed-doors meetings in Brussels. It's a cosy club and there's plenty of "you scratch my back, I'll scratch yours". As the late former European Commissioner Ralf Dahrendorf memorably put it, "the CAP is nothing more than a means for Agriculture Ministers to get in the name of Brussels what they'd never get at their own Cabinet tables".

Decisions on the CAP have always been dominated by farm lobbies at the expense of the wider public interest and it's unlikely that any major change is imminent. But is it any surprise, given the background of Europe's current crop of agriculture ministers? Twelve of the bloc's 27 farm ministers have worked as farmers or for agribusinesses, represented farmers' unions, or lobbied on their behalf. By contrast, none have worked for an environmental group or

Dutch courage

FIVE YEARS AGO, the then Dutch agriculture minister Cees Veerman almost resigned when it emerged that he owned farms that had received EU subsidies. Aware that the Amsterdam-based non-profit Evert Vermeer Foundation was pressuring the government to publish information about farm subsidy recipients, Veerman admitted that, in addition to his farms in the Netherlands, he owned four farms in France, which he had failed to mention in his ministerial declaration of interests, and for which he had received at least €185,000. His fellow politicians were understandably worried about a potential conflict of interest and forced him to answer questions about whether he had relinquished control of the farms before taking office. Veerman denied the subsidies had influenced

his decision-making. "You can't expect people to get rid of all their belongings when they become a minister," he later said in an interview.



Cees Veerman

represented consumer interests. We identify those 12 ministers below, putting them into one of three categories – Farmers, Lobbyists, and Insiders.

The Farmers

Four of the EU's agriculture ministers have particularly strong ties to farming. Two of them – the Netherlands' farm minister, Gerda Verburg, and Finland's farm minister, Sirkka-Liisa Anttila – were literally born into farming families. In Anttila's case, the tradition continues. She grew up on her family dairy farm, and now runs a farm with her husband, Risto. According to her official profile, "after the cowshed was destroyed in a fire, the farm had to switch from high-yield dairy cows to rearing pigs" and, after 36 years of

running the farm, "responsibility has now been passed on to the next generation". Two others went into farming as adults. Austria's agriculture minister, Nikolaus Berlakovich, graduated in agriculture from the Vienna University of Natural Resources and Applied Natural Sciences, before becoming a professional farmer. He later headed the farmers' federation of the province of Burgenland. Denmark's farm minister, Henrik Høegh, trained at the Naesgard cropping school in 1974 and has been a self-employed farmer ever since.

Throughout the 1990s he was chairman of the Agricultural Societies of Lolland, Falster and Moen, and in late 1998 he became vice president of Danish Agriculture, the main farm union. One of Mr Høegh's first decisions when appointed to the post of farms minister in 2010 was to announce a series of tax breaks – for farmers.

Family fortunes

BULGARIA'S FORMER DEPUTY Agriculture minister allegedly embezzled EU farm subsidies worth thousands of euros. Over the summer, farmsubsidy.org reported that Dimitar Peychev's 27-year-old daughter Galina Dimitrova Peycheva-Miteva received some €700,000 in farm subsidies in 2009, making her Bulgaria's largest individual Common Agricultural Policy beneficiary. A more detailed report can be read at www.eutransparency.org/a-family-affair

The Lobbyists

Soon after his election in May as Britain's prime minister, David Cameron appointed Caroline Spelman as agriculture minister. If the name sounds familiar, it's because Spelman served as sugar beet commodity secretary for the National Farmers Union in the early 1980s and was deputy director of the International Confederation of European Beet Growers in Paris. Then there's food and biotechnology lobbying company Spelman, Cormack and Associates, which she set up with her husband, Mark Spelman, in 1989.



Although she resigned as a company director last year, the firm remains in the hands of her husband and still has her maiden name – Cormack – on the company's letterhead. (In June 2010, Mark Spelman applied to have the firm closed down.) No wonder some have questioned how suitable Spelman is to hold a portfolio, which includes responsibility for GM crops and farming subsidies, for the department her firm spent a decade lobbying.

Like Spelman, Belgium's agriculture minister, Sabine Laruelle, has a lobbying background. A graduate in agronomic engineering, she was a researcher in agriculture and the environment at the University of Luxembourg and the King Badouin Foundation, before heading up two farmers' unions. In 1999-2000 she was Director-General of the Belgian Agricultural Alliance and in 2001-2003 she was Director-General of the Walloon Region Agricultural Federation. Her hostility to opening up EU farm subsidies to public scrutiny was plain to see when, in 2005, the Belgian payment agency, BIRB, posted new details about the recipients of farm subsidies. Laruelle resisted publication and said she would not release names and amounts. It would, she said, "lead only to a witch hunt" and that "people focus on examples such as the Queen of England". Others with backgrounds in lobbying are Sweden's agriculture minister, Eskil Erlandsson, a former member of the Swedish Board of Agriculture, and Lithuania's farming minister, Kazys Starkevicius. He established the Association of Family Farmers in 1999 and chaired its council from 1999 to 2004, when he became an elected member of parliament and joined the interparliamentary Rural Affairs and Environment Protection Committees.

The Insiders

Four EU farm ministers worked for agribusinesses in the private sector before going into politics. Slovakia's agriculture minister, Vladimir Chovan, was director-general of Agropartner Ltd from 1996 to 2009. He is also a former chairman of the Slovak Chamber of Agriculture and Food. Slovenia's farm minister, Dejan Zidan, studied animal husbandry and later worked in the veterinary clinic at Agromerur, a firm of poultry-meat producers.

Zidan also edited a magazine about pig farming and became a board member of KG Rakican, a leading Slovenian agricultural firm, whose main activities include crop farming and pig breeding. He was also president of the management

Danish bacon

BARELY A DAY INTO his new job, Denmark's agriculture minister Henrik Høegh became embroiled in a political row over a perceived conflict of interest. Why? As a farmer who received more than €60,000 a year in EU farm subsidies, Høegh was suddenly responsible for signing his own subsidy cheques. Indeed, he had benefitted from the CAP to the tune of €604,787 over the nine years from 2000 to 2008. Farm subsidies even appear to be something of a family business: it seems Høegh's son and daughter were also significant recipients.



Henrik Høegh

board of Panvita Group, a conglomerate of 12 companies primarily involved in pig farming.

Meanwhile, the recent appointment of Romania's new agriculture minister went down badly. Within days some 70 environmental NGOs, including WWF, called for his sacking. Their concern? Valeriu Tabara's links to the genetically modified crop industry: he previously worked for Monsanto, the world's largest GMO producer. "Will Mr. Tabara be capable of representing the interests of Romanian farmers and consumers given his contractual connections to Monsanto" the NGOs said in a statement. Tabara's reply? "There is nothing illegal or secret about this", he told a Romanian newspaper. Even so, Tabara is merely following in the footsteps of his predecessor, Mihail Dumitru. After graduating from the faculty of Agricultural Economics in 1988, Dumitru worked as an economist for a large swine operation outside Bucharest for a couple of years.

Finally, despite passing through the revolving door, Latvia's agriculture minister, Janis Duklavs, remains chairman of a leading brewery company, Piebalgas alus. Since 2000 he has been chairman of the Brewers' Association of Latvia.

So Europe can boast 12 agriculture ministers with backgrounds in farming, agribusiness or lobbying. And that's just the tip of the iceberg. The numerous deputy farm ministers are similarly steeped in the farming industry, for instance UK farm minister Caroline Spelman's number two, Jim Paice.

After school, Paice spent two years working on farms before attending Writtle Agricultural College before launching a career in farm management. He was later

the director of a company which was owned by a large farmer-owned business, and active in the Young Farmers movement. He became chairman of the Agricultural Policy Committee of the National Federation and represented the UK on the European Council of Young Farmers from 1975 to 1979.

Of course, appointing ministers with experience in a particular sector can have its unforeseen advantages. Take Greece's former rural development and food minister, Katerina Batzeli, who was sacked in a cabinet reshuffle this month.

She spent seven years as a consultant on food, agriculture and rural development to the private sector and trade unions. Despite the industry links, she reportedly faced down farmers who blocked roads and the country's borders for weeks after the Greek elections, breaking precedent by refusing to meet their demands.

Taken together, the twelve ministers we have identified as having close links to the farming industry have 151 votes in the Agriculture Council. It's right to ask how suitable they are to take decisions on regulation of farming and the future of farm subsidies when they have spent part of their careers lobbying on behalf of farmers, or indeed are themselves farmers.

Meanwhile, other representatives of civil society are conspicuous by their absence. Where are the ministers who have worked for environmental conservation organizations? Who on the Agriculture Council has spent a previous career lobbying government on behalf of consumers? And who has worked with development advocates, pushing for EU farm policies that are less damaging to the developing world?



The CAP gobbles too big a piece of the EU pie, and touches too many aspects of our lives, to be left in the hands of those with so narrow a frame of reference, so vested an interest in “business as usual”.

About the authors

Jack Thurston is co-founder of farmsubsidy.org, a project described by worldchanging.com as “demonstrating the power of geek activism done right”. He is a joint winner of the 2006 Freedom of Information Award from Investigative Reporters and Editors. He served as special adviser to Nick Brown MP, the UK Minister for Agriculture

Fisheries and Food (1999-2001). His articles have appeared in The Wall Street Journal, The Guardian, The Observer, The Daily Telegraph, Le Monde, European Voice, New Statesman and Prospect.

James Clasper is a freelance writer and editor based in London. His articles have appeared in the Daily Telegraph, New Statesman, Standpoint, the First Post and Spiked! He writes a weekly agriculture policy email digest, available from <http://www.capreform.eu>

They are the authors of ‘Does the CAP fit? Budget reform, the common agricultural policy, and the conflicting views of EU member states’ (February 2010).

EU Transparency is a non-profit organisation which mixes journalism, data and the web to shed light on how European Union institutions and policies are working. Its first two projects are farmsubsidy.org (launched in 2005) and fishsubsidy.org (launched in 2009). EU Transparency has received financial support from the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation, the German Marshall Fund of the United States and the Pew Charitable Trusts.

THE MINISTERS WHO RUN THE COMMON AGRICULTURAL POLICY

COUNTRY FARM MINISTER

Austria

Nikolaus Berlakovich

Graduate in agriculture; professional farmer; former Head of Farmer’s Federation of Province of Burgenland, member of Provincial Government of Burgenland, and deputy Head of provincial parliamentary group of Austrian People’s Party in Burgenland

Belgium

Sabine Laruelle

Graduate in agronomic engineering; former researcher in agriculture and environment at University of Luxembourg; Director-General of Belgian Agricultural Alliance, and Director-General of Walloon Region Agriculture Federation

Bulgaria

Miroslav Naydenov

Director of municipal company Ekoravnovesie; former director of Regional Veterinary-Medical Service in Vratsa, and Secretary General of Veterinary-Medical Service

Cyprus

Demetris Eliades

Lawyer, non-executive director of Hellenic Bank Group, and director of ONGC Mittal Energy Services Ltd; former MP for Famagusta and chairman of Parliamentary Committee on the Environment

Czech Republic

Jakub Šebesta

Director General of Czech Agriculture and Food Inspection Authority; former wine inspector, driver/sampler at State Quality Inspectorate, and winemaking group manager, Krumvíř Agricultural Co-op

Denmark

Henrik Borge Hoegh

Former chairman of Lolland, Falster and Moen agricultural societies, Vice President of Danish Agriculture, chairman of National Committee for Plant, chairman of Danish Plant Forum, and member of Agricultural Council Presidium

Estonia

Helir-Valdor Seeder

Former teacher at Vana-Võidu technical school, member of Estonian parliament, economic advisor to Viljandi City Council, Deputy City Major of Viljandi, and County Governor of Viljandi

Finland

Sirkka-Liisa Anttila

Member of Finnish parliament since 1999; grew up on family dairy farm; former secretary to chief physician at Lounais-Häme Psychiatric Hospital, financial manager at Kankaanpää Vocational Adult Education Centre, secretary for the municipality of Urjala, assistant financial manager at Forssa Municipal Health Centre, and member of European Parliament

France

Bruno Le Maire

Former political adviser to prime minister, councillor for city of Evreux in Eure, and secretary of state in charge of European Affairs

Germany

Ilse Aigner

Worked for Eurocopter in development of helicopter electric systems; former member of parliament, member of the Federal Parliament, member of Budget Committee, and chair of Working Group on Education and Research

Greece

Kostas Skandalidis

Member of parliament; former Minister for Interior and Public Order

Hungary

Sándor Faztekas

Former legal adviser at SZIM engineering works, mayor of Karcag, county councillor in Jász-Nagykun-Szolnok, and member of parliament

Ireland

Brendan Smith

Member of parliament; former Minister for Children at Department of Health and Children

Italy

Giancarlo Galan

Former Central Director of Publitalia '80 and governor of Veneto region

Latvia

Janis Duklavs

Chairman of board of Piebalgas ulus and Seldijs Ltd; member of board of Tondo Ltd; former chairman of board of Kimmels Rīga

Lithuania

Kazys Starkevičius

Member of parliament and member of Rural Affairs and Environment Protection Committees; former member of Rural Affairs Committee, member of Kaunas City Municipality Council, and vice mayor of Kaunas

Luxembourg

Romain Schneider

Former civil servant with Employment Office and mayor of municipality of Wiltz

Malta

George Pullicino

Former architect, chief executive of Malta Council for Science and Technology, Parliamentary Secretary in Ministry for Home Affairs, and Parliamentary Secretary in Ministry for Home Affairs and the Environment

Netherlands

Gerda Verburg

Born into farming family; began career in Dutch Christian Trade Union; former entrepreneur, member of parliament, and member of Social and Economic Council and Labour Foundation

table continued on next page



THE MINISTERS WHO RUN THE COMMON AGRICULTURAL POLICY

COUNTRY

FARM MINISTER

Poland

Marek Sawicki

Member of parliament; former Secretary of State in Ministry of Communication, assistant lecturer at Agricultural and Pedagogic University of Siedlce, and inspector of raw materials at sugar processing plant

Portugal

António Manuel Soares Serrano

Professor in Department of Business Administration at University of Évora; former director of Office for Planning of Agro-food Policy

Romania

Valeriu Tabara

Vice-president of Romanian Academy of Agricultural Science and Forestry; former employee of Monsanto

Slovakia

Vladimír Chovan

Director-General of Agropartner Lt; former chairman of Slovak Chamber of Agriculture and Food, head of collective and state farms, and researcher at Enterprise for Agricultural and Food Management Rationalisation

Slovenia

Dejan Židan

Board member of KG Rakičan d.d. and president of management board of Panvita Group and KG Rakičan; former veterinarian at poultry producer Agromerkur and Animal Health Centre of Slovenia

Spain

Joaquín Rosa Aguilar Rivero

Law graduate; former communist party member, lawyer, city councilor, member of parliament in Andalucía, member of national Congress, and mayor of Córdoba.

Sweden

Eskil Erlandsson

Former agricultural and forestry worker, municipal commissioner for Ljungby, member of parliament, member of Committee on Environment and Agriculture, chair of Committee on Defence, member of Swedish Board of Agriculture, National Environment Protection Board and Enquiry on Future Regional Planning

United Kingdom

Caroline Spelman

Member of parliament; former Sugar Beet Commodity Secretary at National Farmers Union, Deputy Director of International Confederation of European Beetgrowers, Research Fellow at Centre for European Agricultural Studies, and director of food and biotechnology consultancy Spelman, Cormack and Associates

