Agriculture Committee

OPENING STATEMENT BY THE CHAIRMAN

Meeting of 23 February 1972

1. Your Committee is meeting against a background very different from what it has known hitherto.

2. In its last report (L/3600), dated 22 October 1971, the Committee noted that it had not made progress in the search for mutually acceptable solutions and doubted the feasibility of any progress unless the CONTRACTING PARTIES took appropriate decisions.

3. Since then the contracting parties have been apprised of the declarations recently made, one by the United States and Japan, the other by the EEC and the United States. It is to be hoped that a large number of countries will wish to participate in the negotiations which should commence in 1973 and cover agricultural products also.

4. I use the word "also" because the scope of the declarations goes well beyond agriculture alone. However, as far as your Committee is concerned, that implies an intensification of its efforts toward adequate preparation of the negotiations, and also the need clearly to define the course of its work during this year. In order to avoid any ambiguity as to that course of action, it may be useful to make some comments and suggestions in this respect.

5. Your Committee has two tasks before it this year, the first concerns multilateral negotiation; the second, the solution of particular trade problems that still exist in the trade relations of certain contracting parties.

6. And first of all, the Committee's tasks with respect to what were termed the longer-term problems just a short time ago, but which have now become much nearer.

7. In its report of December 1970 (L/3472) the Agriculture Committee, in pursuance of its initial terms of reference, drew up a list under four headings of the methods suggested by your governments as seeming most appropriate for the negotiation of balanced solutions to the difficulties of international trade in agricultural products. Naturally, those methods are unequal in value, precision and scope and, as the Committee stated in its report, at that time none of them seemed to command support wide enough to warrant any conclusion that the elements of a mutually acceptable solution had been found. This is in no way surprising; indeed, it seems to me quite normal that it should have been so, as long as there was some degree of uncertainty as to the political will of governments to enter into negotiations.
8. Now that the fundamental option has been taken up, it is quite clear that the Committee cannot mark time and continue to propose until the negotiations commence a sort of sampling of measures which are acceptable to individual contracting parties, but none of which is acceptable to all of them. For the preparation of the negotiations, the solutions proposed must be reviewed and examined in depth, they must relate to well-defined products or sectors and the advantages or shortcomings of those solutions must be freely debated among you.

9. It seems to me that, leaving aside the very interesting theoretical problems that arise from one or other of the options proposed, the members of the Agriculture Committee should now discuss in practical terms the advantages and disadvantages of the approaches suggested to date. I therefore propose that, with respect to each approach, the Committee should examine:

(a) the type and form of possible commitments;
(b) whether such commitments would lead to the desired effects (including in particular trade effects), i.e. their "meaningfulness";
(c) whether they can be implemented on the basis of existing institutional possibilities or whether a change in legislation would be required;
(d) whether, while recognizing the principle of overall reciprocity, the exact equivalence of commitments is a necessary concept to be pursued within each approach or whether other concepts (e.g. a joint concerted move toward a stated objective) might not in certain instances be more practicable and useful.

10. It is, of course, not my intention to present an exhaustive list of questions for you to discuss, but I hope that the objective of the Committee's work is quite clear: it is to explore the advantages or shortcomings, the possibilities or difficulties, the promises or the risks inherent in the solutions that you have selected in the course of your work to date. To facilitate your discussions we have circulated a document which contains, under a few chapter headings, a list - which is by no means exhaustive - of elements which you might examine. Quite understandably, some delegations may not be able to go into the subject fully at this meeting and in the time available. The important thing is, however, that at this meeting we should reach agreement and decide what the Committee should do, what the basis and objectives of this work should be, and that we should agree on a plan and a timetable for carrying out this task.

11. The Committee has a second task before it this year, deriving from its terms of reference, from the instructions given to it by the Council (C/M/66) and from the joint declarations notified to the contracting parties (L/3669 and L/3670).

12. This second responsibility is to seek, at any time, the means of reaching an amicable settlement of particular trade disputes such as inevitably arise between two or more contracting parties in connexion with particular trade transactions.
13. In my view, the Agriculture Committee should not consider this second aspect of its activities for 1972 as being of minor importance. The success of this particular activity can contribute to achieving a favourable political climate for the moment of negotiation. In this regard, experience in the past two or three years has shown the in some way symbolic importance of some problems, even if their trade effects are relatively limited. Irritating problems such as these are sometimes a focal point for disproportionate obstinacy and political determinations which block the way toward the solution of broader problems.

14. In the course of this year the governments should agree, through a procedure as simple as possible, to seek ways and means of solving such problems or of preventing any multiplication or aggravation thereof.

15. I shall be glad to learn your reactions to the programme of work which I have just outlined.

16. A few words more regarding documentation:

At its meeting of 14 to 15 October 1971, the Committee took note of the documentation on import measures. It noted, however, that there were still some weaknesses in the underlying national documentation, in particular, that some of the basic data were missing and that some of the data were not comparable. The Committee decided that, in view of the short time which had been available for the examination of the summary document and its methodology, delegations should be allowed some further time to suggest corrections or improvements to the secretariat for circulation. At the same meeting the Committee restated its intention to keep the documentation up to date.

I therefore propose that, pending the receipt of such suggestions, the Committee agree that the secretariat continue the updating of the documentation.