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REFORM OR REVOLUTION

Although there was little cause for celebration among Old World vineyards, the Fourth of July 2007 was an undeniably memorable day for European wine. On the one hand, there was the revelation of the long-awaited reform plan by Mariann Fischer Boel, European Commissioner for Agriculture, which brought the prospect of a year of fierce inter-european in-fighting. On the other, there was the news of the bombs being set off by CRAV “wine terrorists” in Southern France. The CRAV were both protesting against Fischer Boel’s reforms and backing up a threat the group had made to Nicolas Sarkozy. The new President had been given a deadline for fixing minimum prices for French wines and for providing protection against foreign competition. In a video message from balaclava-clad figures, he was told that failure to provide satisfaction might lead to “violent action” and even death.

The feather-bedding subsidies demanded by CRAV could hardly be at greater odds with Fischer Boel’s philosophy. The commissioner is calling for the uprooting of 200,000 hectares of European vines: an impressive 6% of total vineyard area, but only half the 400,000 Ms Fischer Boel thought necessary just 12 months ago. Distillation subsidies – used, for example, to dispose of the equivalent of 51 million bottles of unsaleable Bordeaux in 2006 – will no longer exist, and the Community will cease to buy unsold basic table wine. Aid for the transformation of grape juice into rectified must will also end in tandem with the banning of chaptalisation with cane sugar.

The reforms will have an impact throughout Europe, but France will inevitably bear their brunt. Their transformation from words into reality will largely depend on four Frenchmen,

all of whom are new to their posts. Within the wine industry, there’s Yves B nard, the new head of the INAO (see our interview on page 32) who brings a commercial understanding that has not historically been associated with the organisation. Unfortunately, the way France’s wine industry is run means that B nard’s responsibility for appellation control e wines does not extend to vins de pays or vins de table. His influence may be huge, but his powers are limited. Next, there’s the Agriculture Minister. At the opening of Vinexpo 2007, this role was held by Christine Lagarde, the impressive former head of a top UDS legal firm. As trade minister in 2005, she defended France’s subsidies, but more recently acknowledged the need for reform. By the third day of the exhibition, she had been promoted to Finance Minister, following the shock local electoral defeat by Alain Jupp , the Deputy Prime Minister. Her briefly-held job was hand-

»» How will Sarkozy, the teetotal presidential jogger, handle the challenge of violent balaclava-clad terroiristes? ««

ed to former European Commissioner Michel Barnier. It is hard to predict how hard Barnier will fight against the Fischer Boel reforms, but he has said in an RTL interview that “the common agri-

cultural policy is not an archaic policy. It’s modern”. His boss, Prime Minister Francois Fillon, has promised to defend the interests of French farmers at the World Trade Organization talks.

And then, of course, there’s Nicolas “you cannot reconcile alcohol with frenetic activity” Sarkozy. The non wine-drinking President might be expected to sympathise with Fischer Boel’s desire to “restore the link between supply and demand”, but he also has a history of intervening when he pleases. As Finance Minister, for example, he obliged French grocers to lower prices. He will almost certainly answer the French industry’s calls to relax the stringent Loi Evin restrictions on wine advertising; whether he balances this gift with support for the tougher parts of the reforms remains to be seen. The tough teetotal presidential jogger already faces his first challenge. The way he deals with the CRAV terroiristes will give some indication of what to expect.