

'Parliamentarians or robots?' from La Libre Belgique (7 February 1952)


Caption: Two days after the Belgian Senate's ratification of the Schuman Plan, Belgian newspaper La Libre Belgique attacks the behaviour of certain members of parliament during the parliamentary debates.

Source: La Libre Belgique. 07.02.1952, n° 38; 69e année. Bruxelles: Société d'Edition des Journaux du Patriote. "Parlementaires ou Robots", p. 1.

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Last updated: 06/07/2016



The Senate vote on the Schuman Plan

Parliamentarians or robots?

It is agreed: there is nothing very inspiring in the Schuman Plan. We have already pointed out the concern to which it has given rise among industrialists, particularly those in the coal industry.

It is, of course, acknowledged that the price of coal is too high in our country and that consumers must be allowed secure supplies more cheaply; the fear is, however, that the solutions approved may subject the coal producers to an ordeal that they will not be able to bear, in spite of the transitional period that has been laid down. Has not one member of the Administration des Mines (the mining authority) calculated that the implementation of the Schuman Plan would cut Belgian coal production from 28 million tonnes per year to 6 million tonnes? Such an ordeal would obviously result in the transformation of the entire economic structure of Belgium, with incalculable consequences.

Furthermore, the Schuman Plan requires a very unwieldy and costly administration armed with extremely wide-ranging powers. It is difficult to see how such dirigisme will fit in with the aim of the Plan, which is essentially liberal since it is concerned with abolishing protectionist barriers and creating among the six signatory countries a vast common market in coal and steel.

As a result, it is quite understandable that a parliamentarian should have qualms about an initiative that is so far-reaching and unquantifiable in its consequences and refuse to ratify it. We respect, therefore, the independence and the intellectual honesty of Senator P. S. C. Schot who, having strongly criticised the Plan in his speech, refused to vote for it.

But what appears to us absolutely contrary to the essence of the parliamentary system and to man's intellectual dignity is the position taken by certain Socialist Senators in this matter.

Throughout the discussion, many of them could be seen supporting the Schuman Plan with near fervour. This was the case for Mr Dehousse, whose zeal drove him to proscribe voting from an attitude of resignation. What he recommended was enthusiasm: 'Let us weigh carefully the significance of the decision that we are about to take, but let us not take it in a spirit of resignation.'

It is true that Mr Rolin seemed more reserved and opposed the project, but Mr De Block defended it. In short, during the discussion, the Socialist Party appeared to be split. However there seemed to be more supporters in the ranks than opponents of the Plan, and there were good grounds for predicting that a large section of the Party would vote for it.

But what did we see when the votes were counted? All the Socialists abstained en bloc, including Mr Dehousse and Mr De Block, clearly forgetting what they had said in their speeches the day before. A strange way for the Socialist Senator from Liège to show the enthusiasm that he recommended so highly to others!

As a justification of their abstention, the Socialists invoked the rejection of certain amendments tabled by Mr De Groote. But these amendments concerned the internal organisation of the coal sector. The Socialists clearly wanted to take advantage of the circumstances in order to increase centralised industrial planning in Belgium. A poor and misleading pretext for justifying the illogical attitude of most of them!

The simple truth is that, if this happy band of comrades went back on their decisions, the blame must go to the abstention order given them by their party. Of course, a degree of internal organisation and a measure of discipline within the parliamentary parties must be accepted, but how is it conceivable that the nation's representatives say 'yes' in their speeches and then abstain from the vote on the issue? How can they sacrifice their independence and their loyalty to themselves and to the country in this way — especially in matters of such importance, which profoundly commit the nation's future?

Mr Buset has really trained them well.

Such conduct clearly runs contrary to the spirit of the Constitution, which is based on trust for the intellectual honesty of its parliamentarians and which rejects voting in accordance with instructions. If this goes on, from now on we may as well invite the Members and the Senators to absent themselves from the Chamber, except for the end of the month when they pick up their salaries. We should then just have to compare the party committees' decisions to see if a majority could be secured arithmetically! The era of the parliamentary robot has arrived.

But the Socialist Senators' abstention will make Mr Spaak look foolish.

In article published by *Le Peuple* on Wednesday morning, the former Prime Minister was singing the praises of the 'New Europe' on whose altar we must, says he without beating about the bush, lay down part of our sovereignty. If it is true that Mr Spaak follows his party right or wrong, the Socialists themselves seem less and less happy to follow him. The man that Europe envies us is out on a limb. This must make Mr Buset a happy man.