

Letter from André François-Poncet to Robert Schuman (Godesberg, 16 May 1950)

Caption: On 16 May 1950, André François-Poncet, High Commissioner of the French Republic in Germany, sends a letter to Robert Schuman, French Foreign Minister, in which he analyses the initial reactions in West Germany to the Schuman Plan.

Source: Archives Nationales du Luxembourg, Luxembourg, Ministère des Affaires étrangères. Traités. Traités - Economiques et Financiers. Plan Schuman - Négociations - La déclaration Schuman du 9 mai 1950 et les premières réactions - 1950, AE 11346.

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Office of the French High Commissioner in Germany
Directorate-General for Political Affairs

Godesberg, 16 May 1950

The French Ambassador
French High Commissioner in Germany
to
His Excellency Mr Robert Schuman
Minister of Foreign Affairs
Minister's Private Office

Re: Initial response to the Schuman Plan in West Germany

The proposal Your Excellency made on 9 May for the establishment of a joint authority to manage the coal and steel production of France and Germany prompted surprise and enthusiasm here.

The newspapers devoted more space to the French proposals than to any other event for a long time. The real feeling and warmth of the commentaries was overwhelming and would have been unanimous — apart from the Communist press — had it not been for Mr Schumacher, who made a statement to the press the very same day, expressing reservations and ill humour. But many leading Social-Democrat figures and left-wing papers showed that they shared the hopes raised among the vast majority of Germans.

Mention was immediately made of German personalities whose ideas were said to coincide with those set forth in the French plan: Mr Arnold, in particular, who last year presented a scheme for a Franco-German condominium to manage the Ruhr, the Saar and the industrial facilities of Lorraine; the Chancellor, too, who recently outlined a proposal for Franco-German economic union to Mr Kingsbury Smith. The proposal seemed to be a great relief for Dr Adenauer and his staff and they made no secret of their satisfaction. In the world of politics there was widespread agreement that no single event could have done more to consolidate the Chancellor's position and justify, in the eyes of the German public, the position he had adopted in favour of reconciliation, closer understanding and union between France and Germany. There was general agreement that France had undoubtedly seized the initiative, in Europe and Germany.

Certain extracts of the statement by Your Excellency, or specific principles underpinning the French plan, were particularly well received. Above all, commentators welcomed the equal status that both countries would enjoy when negotiating the Treaty, appointing an arbitrator to supervise application of the Treaty, and selecting the members and chair of the High Authority. Under conditions of occupation this seemed a ground-breaking proposal. France was establishing a principle which had the merit of going further than simply providing a satisfactory settlement for coal and steel production problems, however vital this might be for West Germany. The effect was amplified by the fact that everyone in Germany realises that relations with the three occupying powers have deteriorated in recent months, and were yet to improve on the morning of 9 May. The two aspects of the French plan on which the German press has primarily focused are its boldness and its generosity.

Commentators also thought it right that the High Authority should remain open to all Governments wishing to join it, emphasising that this body was likely to constitute the first conference of a European Federation. But they were also proud to note that the first invitation was addressed to Germany, calling on it to form, with France, the core of the future Federation.

You have stated, furthermore, that the High Authority would make any war between France and Germany not merely unthinkable, but materially impossible. No doubt a guarantee of this sort would not be immediately effective against all threats of conflict or against the threat of conflict with the East. But the observation made by Your Excellency nevertheless appealed to the imagination of a people that is tired of

war and scared of the threat of it.

Although they did not draw attention to this point in public, some people in Germany voiced the opinion that the French proposal would take the sting out of the Franco-German dispute over the Saar.

It is not surprising that attention focused primarily on the political aspects and consequences of the French plan. In economic terms the prospect of offering German production new outlets in Europe and beyond, and, interestingly, the reference to under-developed areas and Africa prompted keen approval.

Lastly, the German public was favourably impressed by the precise information provided on the High Authority. It concluded that, unlike some of the interviews given by the Chancellor, the French plan had been carefully prepared.

After two days of initial enthusiasm the response became more mixed. However, the initial impression does not seem to have lost any of its force. Now the reactions are less spontaneous, more visibly marked by the concerns of 'experts' and guidelines issued by party committees. Problems are being raised, difficulties emphasised and objections made. The almost unanimous view seems to be that the French proposal should be taken as an established fact and it is time to prepare positions in readiness for the negotiations, among the Germans themselves and with the Allies, time to look for arguments and guarantees. By the way, the highly contradictory fears that have been expressed reveal how ill-prepared the German public and the country's experts were for solving the problems posed by a plan on this scale, an observation that is undoubtedly valid for other countries too.

The first series of objections raised in West Germany concerned the support the French plan would — or would not — enjoy in France itself and in other interested countries. It was very important for the public here that Your Excellency was able, at the time of the declaration, to confirm its approval by our Council of Ministers. But surely the Socialists, much as industry, had misgivings? How would the United States react, and above all Britain? The news reaching Germany from various capitals in the last few days has on the whole allayed such fears.

Other objections are the result of positions adopted in the course of domestic political disputes inside Germany.

Apart from the overall fact that in the present state of relations between majority and opposition no two-party policy is possible in any important sector (as we saw with the discussions on the Petersberg Accords, this even applies to negotiations giving Germany the most it could possibly hope for under the present circumstances), it should be borne in mind that the French proposal coincided almost exactly with the moment when Dr Adenauer finally decided in favour of the Federal Republic joining the Council of Europe. The Social Democrats, for reasons with which the Department is familiar, still oppose this project. As the refusal to go to Strasbourg may seem unreasonable if it coincides with acceptance of the French proposal, it remains to be seen how Germany's Social Democrats will be able to change their position, bound as they are by peremptory statements from Dr Schumacher on membership of the Council of Europe. It will undoubtedly be easier for them to accept the French scheme, always assuming that they feel able to approve its underlying principles, once the Bundestag has ruled on membership of the Council of Europe.

The French plan touches on two outstanding problems in German domestic politics on which no agreement has been reached, though one cannot in good faith claim that the plan prejudices their settlement. One is the project to nationalise the coalfields; the other concerns workforce participation in company management. Both sides are calculating the amount of support their opponents may glean from the French proposal. Moreover, some parties have pointed out that France, which advocates the internationalisation of the Ruhr undertakings, is against both nationalisation and a return to private ownership in German hands.

Other objections are exclusively technical, in the sense that although they are not devoid of political considerations, such concerns are not so closely related to domestic policy positions. Some hinge on the difficulty of bringing the cost and sale price of German coal and steel into line with the French equivalent.

An increase in the prices of these products, which would be necessary, would surely raise the cost of living in Germany. The German steel industry, in which there has been no investment in recent years, would surely be at a disadvantage. Other objections focus on the limit of 11.1 million tonnes to be placed on steel production in Germany. There can be no doubt, people here are saying, that this cap should be raised. This would be necessary simply to satisfy domestic demand. Would the difference between the 11.1 million tonne cap and actual consumption be spread between French and German output? Will France's heavy industry carry on investing with a view to achieving an output of 15 to 17 million tonnes? Surely the very existence of a cap is contrary to the principle of equality underpinning the French plan?

Last, but not least, people here are asking how one can talk about free and equal association between France and Germany if German production remains under the control of the International Authority of the Ruhr. Is this body compatible with the projected High Authority, they ask?

The objections raised by experts and politicians do not outweigh the reaction of confident optimism aroused in the public mind by the publication of the French plan. Right from the start, the feeling that seized the German public was too strong for more cautious observers or opponents subsequently to consider actively blocking the initiative. This justifies, if it were necessary to do so, the manner in which the French proposals were presented. As yet the most inflexible Social Democrats have adopted a wait-and-see attitude, rather than expressing open hostility.

In so far as the success of the plan depends on Germany, it will not only be necessary to launch the preliminary studies as quickly as possible. There is also a need to explain to the German public how the plan could be implemented, so that unfounded fears and non-existent problems, or excessive demands, coming on top of the considerable, very real difficulties that will arise, do not distract the country from the grandeur of the goal. It would be helpful if the Department could send me any information that might enable me to guide public opinion appropriately in this matter.