

Christopher Hollis, The Schuman Plan and the Conservatives


Caption: In 1952, Christopher Hollis, a Conservative MP and British delegate to the Consultative Assembly of the Council of Europe, sets out in the French magazine Notre Europe the stance adopted by the British Conservative Party in 1950 on the intergovernmental negotiations on the Schuman Plan.

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The Schuman Plan and the Conservatives

by Christopher Hollis

Conservative MP and British delegate to the Consultative Assembly of the Council of Europe in 1951

When, in the summer of 1950, the French Government invited Great Britain to take part, for the first time, in the negotiations on the creation of a supranational authority for coal and steel, the British Labour Government turned down the invitation. It justified this refusal by letting it be known that there could be no question of Great Britain submitting to the decisions of a supranational authority and that it would, therefore, be dishonest on the part of the British Government to participate in meetings whose explicit objective was the creation of such an authority.

The attitude of the Conservatives was less intransigent. During the debate which took place in the House of Commons on 26 June 1950, they pointed out that the objectives of the Schuman Plan were as much political as economic. Mr Schuman, they said, had taken on the role of advocate for the pooling of the resources of Germany and France, presenting this as one step along the path of eliminating the centuries-old antagonism between those two nations. This French initiative, which gave Franco-German relations an entirely new basis, was, as Mr Eden said, essentially a 'peace initiative'.

As for Mr Churchill, he regretted the form in which the French Government had made its proposal. He deplored the fact that the stipulation of a supranational authority had been made the precondition for any discussions. However, given the importance of what he called an affirmation of the principle of a policy oriented towards the pooling of the heavy industries of Europe, he thought that it was a 'tragic error' on the part of the Labour Government to have given a negative reply to Mr Schuman's invitation and to have refused to associate itself with an initiative which was likely to put an end to the age-old quarrels between France and Germany.

It has to be admitted that Mr Schuman had recommended his plan as being the first step towards a European federation. There is no doubt that these words caused a good deal of embarrassment to the British, who on many occasions had unfailingly and haughtily declared that it was impossible for them to join such a federation. Mr Churchill explained that he could not imagine, either now or at any time in the future, that Great Britain would become a mere member of a federal union limited to Europe. On the other hand, we should seek to use every means at our disposal to support and encourage any efforts to unite Europe.

Mr Eden remarked that the French proposal could perhaps have been worded in more felicitous terms but that, the project being what it was, we had to ask ourselves whether the reasons for rejecting this project were sufficiently relevant to justify the severe blow which had thus been dealt to the idea of European cooperation. Mr Eden let it be known that in his opinion they were not. Whatever doubts there might be about the wording of Mr Schuman's proposal, the British Government would not have sacrificed any principles in advance by agreeing to take part in the talks. In fact, Document No 10 in the White Paper on the Franco-British meetings which followed the French Government's invitation contains confirmation of this last point, stating explicitly that the participating States would not be committing themselves until they had signed the treaty and until that treaty had been ratified by their respective parliaments.

It will be difficult for the Socialists to convince people that their objections were directed against supranational authorities as such, because at their Party Conference in Scarborough they had already agreed to the principle of such authorities within a Socialist Europe. Their opposition to any British participation in the Schuman Plan was therefore motivated solely by ideological considerations. In those circumstances, the Conservatives had good reason to take the opposite course to Labour's attitude, and Mr Eden took on the role of interpreter of the prevailing opinion within his party, declaring that the greatest danger was that Franco-German relations would develop independently of any British participation. On behalf of the Liberal and Conservative parties, Mr Churchill declared that national sovereignty was not inalienable, and its partial abandonment was justified if it meant that the safety of people of all countries could be guaranteed as a result.

The objection most frequently heard against British participation in the Schuman Plan would appear to be

hardly justified at all. It is based on the fear that, in the case of overproduction, British mines and iron and steel works could be closed by a mere decree from a supranational authority. In reply to this objection it should be pointed out, first of all, that it seems highly unlikely that European coal and iron production will become excessive at any time in the foreseeable future. Certainly the problem for us will be to produce enough to satisfy our needs and to increase production by any means at our disposal.

Moreover, even if there were worldwide overproduction, it would be quite wrong to believe that British industry would be in an unfavourable position precisely because it was included in the Schuman Plan. On the contrary, low demand on the world market would without doubt benefit the cheapest producers, and it is competition from the latter that would represent the greatest threat to Great Britain, as was the case during the interwar years. The chances of safeguarding our industrial production to a reasonable extent would be much greater under an enlightened supranational authority, in which Great Britain, as one of the bigger producers, would occupy a leading place.

The problems arising from the issue of supranational authorities cannot be resolved a priori. Each individual proposal has to be studied separately. For example, regarding agricultural production, which involves millions of independent farmers scattered over the whole Continent, supranational planning would no doubt be somewhat premature, given that, even at national level, results so far have not been very satisfactory. On the other hand, in the metal-working industry, the centres of production are, by their very nature, small in number. For many years those centres have had special links among themselves, transcending national borders, for the purposes of coordinating production and prices. It would be difficult to think of an industry better suited, by its very nature, to supranational control than the metal-working industry. Besides, if the British Government had arranged to take part in the negotiations, it would have had a chance to ensure that the Treaty included guarantees against any measure that might adversely affect British interests.

Faced with the British abstention, the negotiations therefore took place between France, Germany, Belgium, the Netherlands, Luxembourg and Italy. When the Conservatives came to power, those six countries had already drawn up a draft constitution for a supranational authority. All it needed was to be ratified by the parliaments of the negotiating states. In those circumstances, what could the new Government do? Although the prospect of the British Government's involvement had been welcomed from the outset, it was clear that Britain could not, at this advanced stage, ask the other governments to put their draft constitution on the back-burner and draw up another entirely new one in which Great Britain would have its place. All that it could do, therefore, was to reaffirm the declaration made in Washington in September 1951 by the Foreign Ministers of Great Britain, France and the United States, at a time when the Socialist Government was still in power. That declaration stated that the three Ministers recognised that the initiative of the French Government aimed at creating a European Coal and Steel Community and a Defence Community represented an important step towards the achievement of European unity, and that they welcomed, in the Schuman Plan, an appropriate means of consolidating the economic situation of Western Europe, and looked forward with pleasure to the prospect of seeing it achieved.

However, in all frankness it has to be admitted that British cooperation with Europe has not so far been demonstrated to the extent that European public opinion would have preferred. It was therefore important that the British Government should explain its position towards the Schuman Plan in more specific terms. To some extent, this is what it was doing when, last November, Sir David Maxwell Fyfe declared to the Consultative Assembly that if the Schuman Plan were ratified, Her Majesty's Government would set up a permanent delegation whose task it would be to establish relations with and negotiate with the High Authority. Yet in the same speech Sir David let it be known that no decision had yet been taken on the European Army, and that all proposals would be carefully examined. That same evening, the news arrived from Rome that Great Britain would not be joining the European Army. It seemed clear that there was no common line of conduct within the British cabinet.

Nevertheless, Mr Eden's statement to the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe in Paris, on 20 March 1952, helped to clarify the situation. This is what the British Foreign Secretary said, in his own words: 'The idea of European unity is taking shape [...] in the form of unions for certain purposes between some European States. I am thinking, of course, of the European Defence Community and the Schuman

Pool. Her Majesty's Government have made it plain on several occasions that they intend to associate themselves as closely as possible with these European organisations at all stages of their development, whether political or military. [...] It would clearly be the greatest possible mistake if the Council of Europe were to develop, as it were a rivalry to the European Defence Community or to the Schuman Pool, or to any future European bodies of that kind. [...] Would not a more promising future for the Council of Europe lie in a certain remodelling of the organisation so that its organs could serve as the institutions of the Schuman Plan, of the European Defence Community and of any future organisations of the same structure and membership. [...] It will, therefore, be necessary to study the relationship which ought to be established between the Council of Europe when it meets with representatives of its fifteen Members, and the Council of Europe acting with its more limited membership in connection with the European Defence Community and the Schuman Plan.'

For the time being, then, the above paragraphs set out the broad outlines of the British position. Political observers, both in Great Britain and on the Continent, are no doubt wondering how exactly it should be interpreted. As far as the Schuman Plan is concerned, we can only conclude as follows: Great Britain is not in a position to submit to the supranational authority of the Schuman Plan. However, it hopes that the six contracting parties will be able to overcome all obstacles and create, between them, the European Coal and Steel Community. As soon as such a community is formed, the British Government will appoint a permanent delegation to the headquarters of the High Authority. That delegation will be involved in constant talks with the High Authority, with the aim of taking decisions, with that authority, on the allocation of raw materials, production volume and prices. The British position will be different from that of the six contracting parties only in so far as Great Britain will not be subject to any prior obligation to accept the decisions of the supranational authority. Each individual treaty will be negotiated between the High Authority and the British Government with the delegation acting as intermediary.

If this is the policy adopted by the Conservative Government, one could say that it represents by and large the best that can possibly be salvaged from what is truly a difficult situation. However, it is of the highest importance that we should ensure that it really does mean *that* much at the very least. If the role of the permanent delegation proves to be nothing more than the role of a polite observer, then that really would be a tragedy.