

Press review by the British Embassy in the Netherlands (3 and 5 June 1950)

Caption: On 3 and 5 June 1950, the British Embassy in the Netherlands outlines the United Kingdom's attitude to the Schuman Plan in a press review.

Source: Internationaal Instituut voor Sociale Geschiedenis, Amsterdam. Johannes Marten Den Uyl (1919-1987) 1927-1987. Directeur van de Wiardi Beckmann Stichting (1949-1962). Stukken betreffende het Plan-Schuman. 1950-1951, 1953-1956, 1960., 988.

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The Schuman Plan: British Official View

Background Note N° 109

Press Opinion

The national press in Britain gives its general support to the British Government's attitude towards the Schuman Plan and believes that it would have been impossible for any government, whatever its political meanings, to commit itself to subscribing to a scheme before its practical implications had been examined.

Two leaders in particular, the one the TIMES and the other the MANCHESTER GUARDIAN lay the emphasis on the two aspects of the present position: the refusal of the British Government to commit themselves prior to the conference, and secondly the problem of the nature and character of the international authority which will have to be set up.

The TIMES says:

"None of the western Governments can be happy at the result of the Anglo French exchanges on the Schuman Plan. For the first time since the war France and her continental neighbours are to go ahead with a plan to achieve greater European unity, while Britain regretfully but deliberately, stays outside for the present.

What the Government could not do, and what public opinion here could not expect it to do, was to accept the French plan in advance of examination. Few international conferences could open on the basis of prior commitment, and certainly no British Government could accept in advance a plan requiring the yielding of sovereignty to the extent of placing this country's coal and steel resources — its very sinews — at the discretion of an international authority.

The real question is why the six other Governments have felt able, without any sense of falsely committing themselves, to accept the plan as a working project while the British Government hold back at this stage. To that question there is a cogent answer dictated by this country's way of thinking, its ties with the Commonwealth countries, the pattern of its export trade and its geographical position. This country desires the closest possible association with its neighbours of the Continent, but any Government — whether Labour or Conservative — are bound to envisage that association first and foremost as an association of Governments freely working together and even agreeing to accept limitations on their separate actions or policies under the terms of an agreement negotiated together for a specific purpose. It is in that spirit that the Organisation for European Economic Cooperation has worked and that the military and political provisions of the Brussels Treaty and the Atlantic Pact are being elaborated. It is a method of 'integration' which has shown good results and it may eventually establish the basis for still closer unity, but most people in this country are bound to look long and carefully at any plan involving the yielding of sovereignty".

The MANCHESTER GUARDIAN after repeating the reasons which led Britain to stay out of the discussions, and explaining that France felt herself committed to the communiqué, goes on to say that:

"The choice between Britain and the communiqué may prove to have been rightly made, but it is a choice that should never have had to be made at all. Only two possible reasons can explain it. Either the French misunderstood our probable reluctance to sign such a document — in which case both parties could be to blame — or else they were too ready to put us in the wrong. For it is only the sharper eyed federalists who will distinguish the present communiqué, with its insistence on the supra national nature of the proposed high authority and on the binding nature of its decisions, from any other announcement which would have

made it clear that the European Governments were determinedly getting down to business. And as things have turned out the communiqué may well do more to discredit the British than to raise extra enthusiasm for the plan.

Hitherto the whole favourable acceptance of the plan has been conditional on ignoring a most important point: the actual nature of the independent high authority and the directions in which it might possibly work. This is the point on which the doubters originally picked so that the Western trade unions could ask for trade union representation as an insurance, and many Socialists demand that it should not become a cartel, not because they were necessarily against restricting production but because they were uncertain for what reasons restriction might be ordered. Now the Olympian independence of the proposed authority is beginning to disturb others too; there are suggestions that it should be subordinate to some existing body — to the Council of Europe, for instance, or to the O.E.E.C. So soon as the six Power conference begins to get its grip with this question it may have to modify the 'immediate objective' enough for us to join it.

All our objections boil down to this: that we want to wait and see what sort of high authority it is going to be before we commit ourselves, or appear to commit ourselves, to obey it. They do not mean that we need remain outside the plan for ever".

**British Embassy, Press & Information Services, The Hague.
5th June, 1950.**

Background Note No. 138

The Schuman Plan: British View

The differences in approach of the British and French Governments regarding the calling of a conference to discuss the Schuman Plan should not be interpreted as arising from British opposition to the scheme in principle.

Indeed, the welcome given by the Prime Minister Mr Attlee, shortly after the announcement of the French proposal left no doubt as to the willingness of the British Government to examine the scheme in the greatest detail and to give its fullest possible support. The Prime Minister speaking in Parliament, said:

"It is the declared policy of the western Powers to promote the entry of Germany as a free member into the comity of European nations. The French proposals are designed to facilitate that process, and must consequently be regarded as a notable contribution towards the solution of a major European problem. The proposals also have far reaching implications for the future economic structure of the participating countries, and this aspect will require careful study by his Majesty's Government and the other Governments concerned. His Majesty's Government will approach the problem in a sympathetic spirit, and desire to make it clear at the outset that they welcome this French initiative to end an age long feud with Germany and so bring unity and peace to Europe".

On the 24th May, the Government spokesman in the House of Lords, Viscount Addison, again stated that "we all hope that some practical, useful and reconciling scheme will emerge".

The country, irrespective of its political leanings, was very much of the same mind, urging that everything

should be done to turn the proposals into a workable and working scheme.

Indicative of the non official attitude was a speech made on the 27th May by Sir David Maxwell Fyfe, Conservative M.P.

He said:

"We welcome this plan but I think we all want a great deal of information on it. We want to know whether it is in the nature of a merger or cartel: we want to know what are the powers of the new authority and to whom it is intended that authority will be responsible. We know there is an infinity of work to be done but we believe it can be done and will be done. We are seeking to anchor the drawing back of Germany into the stream of Western civilisation on the realities of steel and iron and coal".

The TIMES had already, the day following upon the announcement of the proposals from Paris, printed a leader which contained the following remarks:

"General American support for the French proposals can therefore be taken for granted, though naturally the United States Government will require more information on many points. In spite of the close international discussions in recent days the proposals were announced by the French without any warning to their western partners.

It should be said at once that there is no reason why Britain should not also welcome in principle this bold contribution to the unity of Europe. In his famous "western union" speech in January 1948, Mr Bevin spoke of the immense possibilities if only the countries of Europe could cooperate economically and develop the resources of their overseas territories. M. Schuman's proposals, with their special reference to the development of Africa (which the Germans have quickly taken up), might be an echo of his words.

"At Zürich in September, 1946, Mr Churchill said that 'the first step in the re creation of the European family must be partnership between France and Germany; in this way only can France recover her leadership of Europe'. Not for the first time, Mr Churchill's arguments have found their way home long after they had been reported lost at sea."

and the TIMES concluded:

"The British Government, suddenly presented with this momentous project are bound in duty to examine it with scrupulous care in the light not only of the practical interests of their own country, but also of the high purposes to which they and their partner nations are pledged".

It will be noted, that the emphasis of the proposals, especially immediately after its announcement, was generally considered in Britain to lie on the Franco German cooperation. It will indeed be recalled that M. Schuman's prepared statement on 9th May contained three points of particular interest:

a. Europe will not be made all at once, or according to a single, general plan. It will be built through concrete achievements, which first create a de facto solidarity. The gathering together of the nations of Europe requires the elimination of the age old opposition of France and Germany. The first concern in any action undertaken must be these two countries.

With this aim in view, the French Government proposes to take action immediately on one limited but decisive point; the French Government proposes to place Franco German production of coal and steel as a whole under a common higher authority, within the framework of an organisation open to the participation of the other countries of Europe.

b. The pooling of coal and steel production should immediately provide for the setting up of common foundations for economic development as a first step in the federation of Europe.

c. The task with which this common higher authority will be charged will be that of securing in the shortest possible time the modernisation of production and the improvement of its quality; the supply of coal and steel on identical terms to the French and to the German markets as well as to the markets of other member countries; the development in common of export to other countries; and the equalisation as well as improvement of living conditions of workers in these industries.

Britain therefore suggested an expert Franco German study of the implications involved. The Government suggested that the United Kingdom and other Governments should actively participate in the discussions without, however, giving a definite undertaking to come in until such time as the examination would reveal more fully the effect upon Europe's and Britain's position, but this communication to the French Government crossed with a French note inviting Britain, Western Germany, Italy, Belgium, Holland and Luxembourg to sign a declaration accepting the principle of a common high authority. This authority, it is understood, would have powers to control coal and steel in these territories and its decisions would be binding on the member Governments.

The British Government felt that it was impossible for her to accept the invitation which would commit her in advance to the scheme without having a much clearer idea than is possible to gather at present about the way in which it is to be carried into effect.

The British and French diplomacy are now engaged upon finding a formula which will satisfy all concerned.

June 2nd's DAILY TELEGRAPH sums up the position as follows:

"It is unfortunate that the preliminaries to an international conference on the Schuman Plan have become clouded by a procedural argument between Paris and London. France desires, and Britain rejects, the signature by all the participant Powers of a prior undertaking to accede to the plan as a condition of joining the conference. No one on this side will misunderstand the reasons behind the French demand. She conceives that the flying start which such an undertaking would provide would afford a guarantee and assurance of success. Since to wish the end is to will the means she detects in British reluctance a sign of lack of enthusiasm. In her view the undertaking would carry no legal obligation, because ultimate adhesion would only become binding after ratification by Parliament. It would connote no more than a token of sincerity and goodwill.

What she fails to take into account here is the British constitutional practice whereby an international commitment accepted by the Government is regarded as morally, if not legally binding, and that in this country, unlike America for example, repudiation by Parliament never happens.

Recently, it is true, the British Government has contrived to create the impression of dragging its feet in matters of international cooperation. That is a circumstance calculated to arouse a natural suspicion in the French mind. In the present case such suspicion, if it exists, is unfounded. The Government is taking exactly the line which any British Government, of whatever political complexion, would have felt bound to take. There are many genuine questions about the practical operation of the plan which it is the purpose of a conference to answer and which must be answered before any commitment can be entered into. Without the

answers the existence of the commitment must almost inevitably prejudice the discussions. It is conceivable, though, we must hope improbable, that the answers might be such that Britain could only agree to terms very different from those now outlined by M. Schuman. Better a good plan that excluded Britain than a bad one which included her.

To say that, however, is not for one moment to imply that Britain is not as anxious as France herself that the plan should come to successful fruition, preferably with her own participation.

In any case, as a sponsor of the existing Ruhr Authority she is bound to have a direct interest in the character and scope of any alternative authority which supersedes it. Moreover, on the crucial point of what the authority is to be, the present French definition that it is not to be either governmental or private is not wholly reassuring.

A compromise on the procedural tangle must therefore be found somehow. One of the difficulties from the French point of view is that all the other invited Powers have already accepted the undertaking which Britain rejects. That undeniably makes modification more difficult, and there are obvious objections to Britain entering the conference on different terms from the other Powers.

It is, however, perhaps not irrelevant to mention that last year Britain's output of hard coal was as great as, and her output of steel two thirds as great as, that of all the other prospective participants put together. It is much easier for a country like Italy, with no coal output and with a steel production of only 2 million tons, to give a prior undertaking than Britain with an output of 202 million tons of coal and 16 million tons of steel.

But M. Schuman's plan is so momentous for the future of Western Europe that it cannot be allowed to become bogged in trivialities at the outset."

The MANCHESTER GUARDIAN, June 2nd, writing about the same subject makes it clear that responsibilities for the unhappy episode are probably equally divided between France and Britain:

"Yesterday the Foreign Office took the only possible step towards resolving the deadlock on the Schuman plan. Italy, Western Germany, Belgium and Holland having all acceded to the French wish for a 'declaration of principle', it proposes to make a separate, much less sweeping statement of our position. This reflects two things: the fact that, given the size and efficiency of our heavy industries and the relatively good conditions of work in them, we shall have more at stake when the plan is discussed; and the fact that we take such advance commitments particularly seriously. It is to be hoped that those two points, which are distinct from mere 'dragging our feet', are generally recognised.

Unhappily they may well not be. It is a great pity that so important a matter as the launching of the first international discussion of the plan should have been the occasion for advertising this difference of approach. Probably the blame can be divided, for the crossing of notes set the whole business off on the wrong foot, and the British government cut no good figure so long as it left the terms of the French request and the nature of its own objections uncertain. Perhaps too the French miscalculated our attitude on the strength of M. Monnet's preliminary talks here. But there is no doubt now that the declaration which the French required of us was an impossible one.

It would have committed us publicly to joining the scheme: to putting our coal and steel industries under an

International Authority whose decisions would be binding although its nature was as yet uncertain. Other countries may have accepted with mental reservations, and it was implied that we should too; but if only for the reason that we are most exposed to criticism such deception would have been impossible.

For a public declaration of a sort, and particularly one which advertised British support, there was a sound argument. But because the proposed text went so far the effect has been only to show up British misgivings (even to make them appear more serious than they are) and to add an unnecessary element of uncertainty to the eventual negotiations. Yet even given the initial mistake, much of the cross talk and irritation could have been avoided if the French Government had taken the British into its confidence.

That the original announcement of the plan had to be a surprise was easily understandable; but it is harder to see why the invitation too, and the proposed declaration should have been sprung on us, especially if (as seems likely) it was found possible to discuss them with Dr Adenauer. It does rather sound as though the French Government has been trying to have things both ways: to make no adequate allowance for an easily foreseeable British attitude, and yet to lay great emphasis on the need for full British cooperation.

A further mistake, as matters have turned out has been the too public advertisement of the whole operation. It is undoubtedly necessary to give very full publicity to the eventual declaration of principle, which can be compared to a ceremonial parade like the Trooping of the Colour. But it is confusing matters to take the preliminary steps in public too.

The world only notices who is out of step and wonders whether, under the circumstances, the objective will ever be reached.

If Britain is in any case determined not to cooperate that may not matter much. But in fact there has from the first seemed a good chance that she might do so, and it is certainly vital that she should take a full part in the discussions. It is not just that we, the British, are being asked to sacrifice something for the sake of an impressive opening appearance. It is the success of the whole scheme which has been risked, and one doubts whether that is worth while. Effective negotiation can justify a lame start. But we cannot go on arguing”.

British Press and Information Services, The Hague.