

Interview with Georges Berthoin: the Association Agreement between the ECSC and the United Kingdom (Paris, 22 July 2005)

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[Étienne Deschamps] What do you recall of the 1954 negotiations concerning the implementation a few months later, in late 1955, of the Association Agreement between the ECSC and the United Kingdom?

[Georges Berthoin] The United Kingdom issue, right from the start was, and still is, crucial, because the United Kingdom, and this should not be forgotten, was the centre of the largest global empire in human history; London governed a large part of the planet. London, where you could say that the British considered themselves the fathers or the great-uncles of the United States of America; the Commonwealth was a powerful force and the British regarded themselves as very different from the continental countries, of which they often said: 'It's an association of countries that have been conquered at one time or another during the last wars.' They had their own conception of Europe and were much divided on the issue. The first person to use the phrase 'United States of Europe' after the war was Winston Churchill, but he used it with two reservations, saying: 'a kind of United States of Europe' on the one hand and, on the other, he required that the United States of Europe be built with partnership between France and Germany at its core. He added that this enterprise had to be realised with the sponsorship of the United States of America, the Soviet Union and the British Empire; in other words, he hoped that this would come about, but with Britain remaining on the outside. But there still remained this ambivalence; for, at the same time, there were those British who were well aware of the historical circumstances and saw the need for a certain degree of unity, which should not, however, go too far for fear of creating a sort of continental bloc that might be regarded as a potential threat. So there did exist this division.

Then, when the Schuman Plan was launched, Monnet invited the British to take part and they refused. But, at the same time, a lot of countries, particularly the Dutch, the Belgian, the Luxembourgers and the French, five years after the war was over, were not entirely at ease within a system that excluded Great Britain — which, after all, had been the large European liberating country, alongside the Americans, and the only one that had remained... — and Germany, whose destiny was still a matter of conjecture. What it had been was well known, but not what it was to become. So the British were able to play upon this ambivalence, which existed among many of us, but at the same time they realised, nonetheless, that something had to be done. As a result a new concept was needed and the Association system was found; Association — and this has since been forgotten — was aimed at telling the British: 'You will work together with us. The decisions that we shall take will be discussed with you, but the decisions regarding coal and steel that you will take must likewise be discussed with us.' Hence this Association Council. A concept had been found — one which was unlikely, the norm in European matters — and policies drafted that were both parallel and convergent. I am not quite sure what happens to two parallel lines that converge, but there you are. That was the idea. They made up part of the system without being within it; each side retained its independence, but since there was a dialogue going on, the interests and the views of both parties exerted an influence on either side. That was the idea behind the Association Council.

There was quite an interesting consequence of the Association Treaty. It was negotiated in both French and English, yet the Treaty of Paris has but one original language, which is French. I recall the session in which the Association Treaty was put before the ECSC Council of Ministers very well; Jean Rey was the Belgian minister and Monnet said: 'Well, it has been negotiated. I propose that there should be two authentic languages: French and English.' Jean Rey, who could not have been more European or more federalist, replied: 'No, I cannot accept that. In Belgium there are two languages enjoying equal status: Dutch, or rather Flemish, and French.' At this Monnet was most surprised — I remember the session — he was most surprised. Jean Rey said: 'I am sorry, but I just cannot do it.' So there had to be Dutch or Flemish as well. At that point, the Dutch delegation said: 'Very well, in these circumstances, Dutch will be an authentic language.' Then the Germans said the same thing, the Italians too... And the tower of Babel that the European Union has become — where all the languages enjoy equal status — dates from that point. It all dates from the day when Monnet presented the Association Treaty for consideration by the Council of Ministers. It is something that has been forgotten. Later on Jean Rey was sorry because when he was President of the European Commission he suffered the consequences of all these languages, but this was a Belgian constitutional requirement that he had been obliged to respect.

The Association Council went on to function in positive circumstances because the British representatives — there was a diplomatic mission, you know, the first one to the ECSC being the American mission led by David Bruce, and the second, the British one led by Sir Cecil Weir, who had two deputies: Mrs Ackroyd for steel, and Derek Ezra, who was to become Lord Ezra and Chairman of the National Coal Board, for coal. And it happened that these three key figures (there was a diplomat, Sir James Marjoribanks) it happened that these three key figures were personally convinced of the value of the Schuman Plan as a contribution to the unification of Europe and, quite apart from the instructions they received, were personally in favour of what we were doing. So putting it into practice was quite easy and took place in an atmosphere of mutual confidence. It was so as to implement this Association Council that the British accepted that the High Authority should send a diplomatic mission to London. This was the beginning of a whole range of external diplomatic activity by the coal and steel Community, and after that, well, there you are!