


# Interview with Hubert Ehring: the FRG and the implementation of the Schuman Plan (Uccle, 25 October 2006)

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[Étienne Deschamps] In 1953, as Legal Adviser of the Ministry of Economics, in Bonn, you took part in the first stages of the implementation of the Schuman Plan in Germany. In that period, between 1953 and 1954, what was the position adopted by the German industrial, economic and political circles towards these new European issues?

[Hubert Ehring] On this point, first of all, I should like to make a comment concerning my Minister, Erhard. He has been criticised for a lack of enthusiasm regarding the increasing European integration, but in no way was he opposed either to reconciliation between France and Germany, or to the opening of wider markets. He had just ensured the economic revival of Germany by introducing a market economy and ruling out any interference by the public administration. From his point of view, in this situation the idea of creating a new administration to guide the economy was not something that was designed to please him, was it? All the more so since he was not convinced that his economic proclivities were shared by other Member States.

Besides that, the position of the industrial sector was a generally favourable one. The coal and steel Community was preceded by the High Authority of the Ruhr; in this body there was an international administration but only German companies came under this administration. The new Treaty brought the German companies under administration and on an equal footing together with the other States: that could not be seen as a definite advantage. But there were also other considerations that resulted in their welcoming the new Treaty. They were the provisions in the new Treaty regarding prices.

At the time, there was a shortage of coal. That is why, of course, in this area, price control was maintained at national level; however, the new Treaty conferred the price-fixing power on the High Authority. One of the first legal opinions that I expressed at the Ministry of Economics emphasised this new power and it concluded that the new Treaty ruled out any price control by domestic authorities. It was an internal report, but there was a leak and it was circulated in all the collieries, which were delighted since they felt that this freed them from price control.

It is true that the High Authority also has the power to fix maximum prices, but only after an extremely weighty procedure involving, firstly, studies alongside the industrial associations concerned, and then consultation with the Consultative Committee and the Council. It was less intimidating for them. The ECSC Treaty price system consisted in requiring companies to publish price lists and the High Authority imposing sanctions against those who deviated from them. It was possible to deviate from them, but only at the price of drawing up and publishing another list.

We toured the industrial associations in order to explain the new Treaty and I shall never forget — how shall I put it? — the jovial enthusiasm with which the large steel-makers greeted our explanation of this system. In order to understand their reaction, one must recall the difficulties involved in making an understanding on prices work. The understanding was, in itself, illegal. Accordingly, it was not possible to go to court to collect the fines that are laid down. We therefore made use of bills that were paid to a central agency and then circulated when there was a breach of the rules. But instead of all these bothers, the new Treaty offered the industry price lists that they were obliged to publish and sanctions imposed by a public authority against those who did not observe them.

This price system had been invented at the start by Mr Uri in order to guarantee equal access — because the High Authority of the Ruhr had still tolerated, as in all the other States; that national industry was provided with coal at terms that were more advantageous than coal that was exported. I understand his interest in equal access, but he certainly was unaware of the gift he was making to the industrialists as a result. We had created a new environment in which the representatives of the various States were to ensure that everything took place on an equal footing; this represented enormous progress compared with the collaboration of the occupying regime with the domestic agencies. It goes without saying that they liked it. But this is precisely what I want to emphasise: at the time we were very unaware of the importance and the influence that this new enterprise could have in the future.