

Note from Oliver Harvey on the United Kingdom's absence from the negotiations on the Schuman Plan (London, 6 June 1950)

Caption: On 6 June 1950, Oliver Harvey, British Ambassador to Paris, sends a note to Kenneth Younger, Minister of State to the British Foreign Minister, Ernest Bevin, in which he outlines the events that led to the United Kingdom's absence from the negotiations on the Schuman Plan.

Source: The National Archives of the United Kingdom, [s.l.], Kew, Richmond, Surrey, TW9 4DU.

<http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/>, Records created and inherited by the Foreign Office, FO. Schuman plan for the whole of the French and German coal and steel production to be placed under a common High Authority: discussions and negotiations 1950, FO 371/85844.

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French proposals for pooling Western European heavy industry

A review of the Preliminary Discussions

Sir O. Harvey to Mr Younger (received 7th June)

(No 343. Confidential)
Paris, 6th June, 1950.

Sir,

Now that the French Government have finally decided to go ahead with the negotiations on the "Schuman Plan" without the participation of His Majesty's Government, it may be opportune to review and comment on the somewhat confusing discussions which led up to this decision.

2. About the middle of May M. Monnet and M. Clappier, respectively Chairman of the French Planning Commission and Chef de Cabinet to M. Schuman, and the supposed joint authors of the plan, were reported in the press to have gone to Bonn to explain the plan to the German Federal Government. I happened to see M. Clappier on 24th May immediately after his return from Germany. The meeting took place on a social occasion and I was not able to have much conversation with him, but he informed me that he had persuaded Dr. Adenauer to accept "the French text" as a basis for negotiation. At the time I assumed that he meant by this the original French memorandum containing the Schuman proposals, but it subsequently transpired that he meant something quite different. He and M. Monnet had in fact persuaded the German Government to subscribe to a document which they had up to this point failed to show to His Majesty's Government. This was a draft communiqué setting forth that the Western European Governments had "decided to pursue a common policy aiming at peace, European solidarity and economic and social progress by the method of pooling their production of coal and steel and of the institution of a new high authority whose decisions would bind the participating countries." This decision was to be announced by the participating countries before the convening of a conference to discuss the plan.

3. M. Massigli was instructed to inform you of this proposal on 25th May. His instructions crossed a personal message from Mr. Bevin to M. Schuman suggesting direct conversations between France and Germany, in which His Majesty's Government would participate. Nothing was said in the Secretary of State's message about any form of prior commitment.

4. In the complicated and intense negotiations which occupied the ten following days no real progress was made from this initial conflict of views. The French Government continued to insist on a communiqué containing a prior commitment. His Majesty's Government continued to refuse to sign a blank cheque, while reiterating their desire to participate in the proposed conference. Various suggestions were made for getting round the difficulty, such as a separate communiqué by His Majesty's Government or the addition to the French draft of a special paragraph covering the position of His Majesty's Government, on the lines that the latter would participate in the proposed conversations "in a constructive spirit and in full sympathy with the aims of the French proposal, in the hope that as a result of the discussions there would emerge a scheme in which they could be able to join." The French Government rejected these proposals, although the original suggestion of an addition to the communiqué explaining the British position had come from M. Schuman himself. At one point they attempted to modify their own communiqué in a sense which they believed would make it more acceptable to His Majesty's Government, by proposing that it should state that the Governments "take as their immediate aim the pooling of their production of coal and steel and the institution of a new high authority whose decisions would bind the participating countries." But this modification did not appear to His Majesty's Government to remove the objections which they had felt to the original text, and as a final attempt to escape from the impasse they suggested to the French Government the holding of a meeting of Ministers of the countries interested, at which the question of the most effective and expeditious method of discussing the problems at issue could be examined and settled.

5. I conveyed this proposal to M. Schuman late on the evening of 2nd June, and he appeared at first to

welcome it. There is little doubt that at this point he was extremely anxious to find a solution. I had seen M. Parodi earlier in the day and impressed strongly upon him the danger of our two countries pursuing separate courses. M. Moch, the Socialist leader, who happened to be dining with me that night, made it plain to me that the Socialists were strongly opposed to proceeding with the plan without British participation, and said that if such a proposal were made the Socialists in the National Assembly ("mes cent voix" as he described them) would be mobilised against the Government. M. Jacques Bardoux of the Foreign Affairs Commission of the National Assembly also expressed to the Minister on the same day his disapproval of the way in which the matter was being handled by the Ministry for Foreign Affairs. M. Parodi was present at my interview with M. Schuman, and I was reasonably optimistic that evening that the somewhat rigid attitude adopted by the Ministry for Foreign Affairs, largely I believe under the influence of M. Clappier, might be modified. But when I saw M. Schuman again the next morning he said that his Government had upon reflection felt unable to agree to the proposed meeting of Ministers to discuss procedure. He felt that such a meeting would delay the opening of negotiations and there was a further point, which he wished to keep confidential, namely that it would be undesirable that at such a meeting Anglo-French divergences should be aired in the presence of a German delegation.

6. It was clear at this point that it was useless to continue the discussions, and the French immediately published their communiqué on behalf of the six Powers who had accepted the invitation. His Majesty's Government published at the same time a communiqué setting forth their own attitude to the question and the proposals they had made, and the French then issued an additional communiqué announcing their intention to keep us informed and their hope that we might still find it possible to join or associate ourselves with the plan later.

7. Though there are of course underlying differences of opinion of a more fundamental character, there is no doubt that the actual cause of the failure of the negotiations was the French insistence on a prior published commitment by His Majesty's Government. What were the reasons which induced the French Government to take so rigid an attitude upon this problem?

8. Clearly the difference between British and French mentality and methods of action played an important part. The negotiations were in fact a classic example of the difficulty of reconciling French cartesianism with British empiricism, the French habit of proposing lofty aims and then thinking out the methods of achieving them with the British habit of only advancing step by step. But other more immediate factors were involved. In the first place the French Government were astonished and pleased at their success in tying up the Germans, and were very unwilling to do anything that would enable them to escape. Moreover, all the other countries consulted had agreed to the French communiqué, though the Netherlands Government had instructed their Ambassador here to say that if in the light of the negotiations the plan appeared to them unworkable they reserved the right to reconsider their decision. Secondly, the French undoubtedly feared that an uncommitted British delegation participating in the negotiations might blur the clarity of their plan by counterproposals. Both M. Monnet and M. Clappier suffer perhaps from having excessively tidy minds. To them the supreme authority, involving a delegation of sovereignty, was an essential feature of their plan, and they suspected that His Majesty's Government had in mind some much looser form of control, more on the lines of the Organisation for European Economic Co-operation, a suspicion which was confirmed by the line taken by the British Labour Party delegation at the Socialist meeting at Copenhagen. Therefore, although the French sincerely wanted British participation, some at least of them preferred to do without us than to let us in uncommitted. Not only did they fear that our own delegation might take an unwelcome line, but they were undoubtedly apprehensive lest what they considered our bad example might be followed by some of the other countries.

9. It is possible to respect this attitude while disagreeing with it. But there is no doubt that some of the methods used by the Ministry for Foreign Affairs on this occasion are open to serious criticism. Perhaps the worst element was the approach to Bonn without prior consultation with London. Another unfortunate feature was the excessive speed at which the French chose to conduct the negotiations. Both are no doubt explained by the French desire not to lose the plan's original momentum. But they resulted in creating an unpleasant impression of pressure on His Majesty's Government.

10. The French press and public opinion followed the discussions with considerable anxiety. The press were freely fed with facts and opinions by the Quai d'Orsay, but the British point of view was also widely and fairly reported. Both sides came in for considerable criticism. At one point there was a tendency to blame yourself and the higher officials of the Foreign Office for acting without consultation with the senior members of His Majesty's Government, though this disappeared with the announcement of the Cabinet meeting on 2nd June. On the whole the press tended to brush aside the procedural difficulties and to suggest that fundamental differences had appeared and that His Majesty's Government had already made up their mind to reject certain essential features of the French plan. This feeling persists in spite of the terms of the British communiqué of 3rd June, and is thought to find confirmation in the Copenhagen discussions mentioned in paragraph 8 above. However, the French Government's desire to restrain polemics in the press here seems to have had a good effect, and though there is undoubted uneasiness at the appearance of this Anglo-French difference of opinion, there has so far been little tendency to distribute praise or blame for the breakdown and an evident anxiety that Great Britain should sooner or later, in some form or another, after all become associated with the pool.

11. In spite of this unfortunate start of the discussions, the importance of the plan – or rather of a plan involving the pooling of Franco-German iron and steel resources remains supreme, for it is difficult indeed to see by what other means French secular fear of superior German economic strength and military power can be reconciled with Germany's claim to equality and partnership with Western Europe.

12. The plan in its present form is based on a supra-national Authority with certain sovereign powers. It may be doubted whether the surrender of sovereignty in so vital a sphere as national heavy industry with all the military, economic and social consequences involved, will prove acceptable to the parties concerned, particularly if Great Britain is absent to act as a counter-weight to Germany. The French Socialist Party, as we have seen, has grave misgivings, and yet its approval or at least acquiescence is essential to acceptance of the plan by the National Assembly. It may be that His Majesty's Government will feel able to participate even in a supra-national Authority as the details become clearer. If so, it would go forward under the best auspices. On the other hand, if they cannot, minds may perforce turn to the alternative method of control by means of a Commission or Committee of Delegates without sovereign powers but representing Governments and possibly, in certain circumstances, accepting a majority vote. This is certainly not what the authors of the present Schuman Plan contemplate. Indeed, they regard a supra-national Authority controlled by supermen as essential to success.

13. But what is essential is a plan, not by any means necessarily this particular form of plan, which will bring about the practical effects of pooling. It may prove that after the present line of advance has been thoroughly explored (and it is perhaps better that it should be explored by those who already accept its principles), the difficulties may be found too great for final acceptance to be achieved in the present state of political opinion in France and elsewhere. The opportunity would then present itself for His Majesty's Government again to enter the scene with their own version of the plan, in which they themselves would be willing to take full part.

I am sending copies of this despatch to His Majesty's Representatives at Washington, Rome, Brussels, The Hague and Luxembourg and to the United Kingdom High Commissioner in Germany.

I have, &c.

OLIVER HARVEY.