

Interview with Étienne Hirsch on the secrecy surrounding the drafting of the Schuman Plan (2 July 1980)


Caption: On 2 July 1980, Étienne Hirsch, former Commissioner-General of the French National Planning Board and former President of Euratom, explains to French historian Antoine Marès why the secrecy deliberately maintained around the preparations for the Schuman Plan was an essential condition for its success.

Source: L'Europe une longue marche. Lausanne: Fondation Jean Monnet pour l'Europe, Centre de recherches européennes, 1985. 104 p. (Cahiers rouges). p. 39-40.

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[...]

Antoine Marès: Do you think that the secrecy surrounding the drafting and adoption of the Schuman Plan was essential to its success?

Étienne Hirsch: Absolutely. I am firmly convinced of that. You will be aware of the degree of hostility it attracted in industrial circles; so much so that if it had been in the public domain beforehand, the Government would never have dared to go ahead with it, saying that it would lead to unrest. One thing I can tell you — I don't whether Monnet talks about it in his memoirs — I was the only one involved in the plot who had any kind of industrial background, and I was aware of my responsibilities. I asked Monnet to talk to a coal worker and a steel worker under my responsibility. He agreed to do so. I then met with the chairman of the French Coal Board, who was a member of our committees and whom I knew well and trusted a great deal. I showed him the plan and asked his opinion on the repercussions for the coal mines. I also showed him Monnet's note on Germany, so that he would know that this wasn't a joke but was in response to a very serious concern. He said to me: 'In any case, our coalmines are done for; this will speed things up a bit as regards the collieries in central and southern France, but it has to be done. You can go ahead.' In relation to steel, the matter was more delicate. I met with a member of our steel committee in whose discretion, for personal reasons, I had absolute faith. His name was Aron and he was a technical adviser within the French Steel Industry Employers' Association, and before the war he had been director-general of a large steel manufacturer. I showed him the two documents and his response was: 'It's that or death.' I was relieved. I considered these reactions crucial, coming as they did from people with responsibility and expertise.