

'The Schuman Plan - After the French vote' from La Libre Belgique (15 December 1951)

Caption: On 15 December 1951, the Belgian conservative daily newspaper La Libre Belgique takes a cautious stance on the Schuman Plan, deeming it incapable of resolving the crisis affecting the Belgian coal industry.

Source: La Libre Belgique. 15.12.1951, n° 349; 68e année. Bruxelles: Société d'Édition des Journaux du Patriote. "Le Plan Schuman", p. 1; 2.

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The Schuman Plan

After the French vote

So the French Parliament has adopted the Schuman Plan. The majority vote which carried it was undeniably large, and it cannot be said that the result was obtained by a narrow margin.

However, let us note, first of all, that it would have been a paradox if France, the cradle of the Schuman Plan, had rejected it before other countries had even been called on to take a decision. The fact that, at a given moment, there were fears that it would be blocked is most significant, and, despite everything, it is not at all encouraging when the very future of the institution is considered.

What is more, it is clear that France ratified it only under external pressure, from the United States if you want to know who, and doubtless with the aim of obtaining the funds that were granted it on the very next day after Parliament had voted. There was certainly nothing coincidental about these events; its adoption of the Schuman Plan was the condition for the receipt of 600 million dollars that France has recently found itself granted by way of special aid.

The way in which the Schuman Plan was ratified is therefore not calculated to reassure us about the conduct of the processes for implementing and operating it. The fruit of a political idea, it has been adopted in the context of a political idea, and that is dangerous for an economic organisation. This should make us particularly careful and even cautious.

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Will the Belgian Parliament ratify the plan? We believe that, at the very least, such ratification ought to be hedged about with reservations. This idea has been expressed in certain circles.

It is well known that we are especially vulnerable on three fronts where the coal industry is concerned. There is, first of all, the issue of levelling out wages sufficiently, which is necessary if the coal industry is to survive after it has significantly increased its productivity. Secondly, there are the powers of the High Authority which, although excessive in certain respects, are insufficient in others. Nor does it look as if it will be possible to avoid displacing excess production, which would ruin a region or even a country. Lastly, there is the duration of the treaty: in 50 years, much may change, and the example of the economic twists and turns that have taken place over the last two years indicates the need for prudence in this respect. Let us remember that, at the time that the Schuman Plan was being drawn up, we were faced by an excess of coal, so much so that the collieries had shut down temporarily. Then again, the Economic Commission for Europe declared, from Geneva, that the iron and steel industry was over-equipped and that a crisis would break out in the years following 1952. One can see what has come of the forecasts made on the subject.

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The most serious criticism that can be made of the Schuman Plan is clearly its inordinate duration. This gives special importance to the other criticisms, and it may well compromise the development of some countries. This is the area, in our view, that concerns the reservations that would be formulated by the Belgian Parliament.

At all events, Parliament should ratify the Schuman Plan only on condition that, if, after five or ten years, it proved clearly contrary to the interests of the country and was, for example, leading to the decline of a region, like the Borinage district, the country would be released from the agreement. If such a reservation were accepted, then we might run the risk involved in a levelling out of wages and in the powers held by the High Authority. It would become clear whether these two dangers were, in practice, as serious as they appear to be today.

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But, people will say, the Schuman Plan is not a train which we are simply invited to board, without our having any right to change the slightest detail as regards the route or the timetable? Have we not merely to say 'yes' or 'no'? It may well be that it will be presented as such, and the reservations that we could express may be declared null and void. However, we should be in a much stronger moral position if, were the experiment to turn sour on us, one day we found ourselves forced to declare that the obligations imposed by the Schuman Plan were too heavy for us to bear. Consequently, even if they were not approved, our reservations would constitute a precaution.

In essence, any reservations that Belgium might express would not unduly worry promoters of the Schuman Plan. If they are really convinced of the excellence of the Schuman Plan, and if Europe is to experience prosperity comparable to that enjoyed by the United States, as the French press would have us believe, then it will cross nobody's mind to abandon it. In that event, the reservations will remain a dead letter, and they will have calmed some fears. In this way, everyone will be able to work wholeheartedly for the successful implementation of this shared enterprise.

On the other hand, if the Schuman Plan goes wrong, it is certain to fall to pieces, reservations or no, as soon as the situation becomes too fraught. No government will be able to allow the abandonment of a coalfield just to conform to an agreement of this nature. No government will be able to stand idly by while its processing industry is unable to work because the suppliers of coal on which they rely have turned out to be incapable for one reason or other. As a result, with or without this reservation, the Schuman Plan will cease to exist if it results in any such untenable situations. So will it be said that the reservations are useless? Not at all, for they could allow an orderly retreat instead of a rout among the countries participating in the Schuman Plan.

The Schuman Plan is currently before the Senate. The Senators have begun a cool-headed appraisal of it; one that must not be hurried. We must not imagine that the vote by the French Parliament has removed all the difficulties and that they will be able to make short work of it. The Schuman Plan has simply overcome one major, unexpected obstacle which it found in its way. Apart from that, nothing has changed.

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As for the other issues, the Belgian coal industry must put this breathing-space to good effect by organising and rationalising itself. We have already stated that the increase in output, as revealed by the most recent statistics, is too slow and that it is absolutely vital that we increase it from 750 kg, its present level, to 900 kg. This additional respite that we have been given must be fully exploited, for we repeat that, with or without the Schuman Plan, the price of coal has to go down in Belgium, and this must come about as a result of the increased productivity of our coal industry.