

'Problems of a fine initiative' from The Daily Telegraph (12 may 1950)

Caption: On 12 May 1950, British newspaper the Daily Telegraph highlights the difficulties involved in the implementation of the Schuman Plan and emphasises the economic and political factors of the French plan.

Source: The Daily Telegraph. and Morning Post. 12.05.1950, No 29 599. London: The Daily Telegraph Ltd.

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Problems of a fine initiative

M. Schuman can have good reason to be gratified at the first reactions to his unheralded proposal for the integration of the French and German steel and coal industries under an international authority. In Bonn it has been received with an acclaim which may dispel a good deal of the bitterness caused by the recent French action over the Saar. Mr. Attlee has welcomed what he called "this French initiative to end the age-long feud with Germany and so bring unity and peace in Europe." Mr. Acheson has pronounced his benediction on a step so eminently in accord with the American desire for closer economic union in Europe, towards which no great progress has been made hitherto. Moscow's view is not yet on record, but it can be predicted with as much certainty as tomorrow's sunrise, peace and unity being the last things which it wishes to see prevail in Europe or anywhere else, except at its own dictation.

It seems evident that M. Schuman's motive is primarily political and only secondarily economic. The first essential towards the restoration of Germany to the comity of Europe is the removal of French fears of a renewed German military threat. Steel is the key to modern military power, and the joint control of its production could be adapted to prevent its use for illicit armament. The willing acceptance by Germany of such a plan would provide at once a guarantee of her good faith, and a safeguard against abuse. Thus there is offered the prospect of a major concrete measure broadening outwards towards a general political reconciliation between the two countries. The idea has been mooted before, but its adoption by Mr. Schuman as official French policy is an imaginative stroke of statesmanship and, subject to satisfactory fulfilment, replete with promise.

At the same time, it must be recognised that the proposal is no more than a framework, of which the details have yet to be filled in. Here we come upon various practical difficulties. In the first place, what is to happen about the existing Ruhr Authority? Is it to be supplanted by a new authority, and, if so, what? The possibility of the Ruhr Authority being superseded by a plan capable of achieving a similar purpose without affront to German susceptibilities is no doubt one of its attractions to the Germans. But Britain and America are also parties to the Authority, and both, but especially Britain, have a direct interest in Continental steel affairs. America could scarcely participate in Mr. Schuman's plan. Britain, in common with all other Continental producing countries, is invited to join. If, for economic or other reasons, she found participation difficult, what is to be her future rôle in the matter?

The economic aspects of the subject must demand careful consideration. Even as between the two proposed "founder" countries the difficulties are not to be underestimated. It is envisaged, for example, that labour conditions among all participating countries must be equalised, and it so happens that there is a considerable disparity, at present exchange rates, between French and German wages in the industry. How are these to be equalised without corresponding reactions on the wage structure of all other industries? Again, the co-ordination of investment programmes can be no easy matter; likewise the pooling of exports. Each new country that joins adds to the difficulty of solving these and analogous problems. All these considerations must be duly weighed, but they must be weighed in relation to the major objectives which make success a highly desirable goal of policy.