

‘The 30 days that shook Europe’ from the 30 jours d’Europe (May 1975)


Caption: A colleague of Jean Monnet and a firsthand witness of Robert Schuman’s Declaration in the Salon de l’Horloge of the French Foreign Ministry in Paris, François Fontaine describes the events that took place.

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The 30 days that shook Europe

Eyewitness of the events that were to end with the creation of the Community, François Fontaine gives a detailed account of them for the first time

Although, today, no one can say with any certainty where the European Community is going, at least we know very precisely where it is coming from: from nothing; as for which date it emerged: it was on 9 May 1950; lastly, in which circumstances: that is the story that I am about to tell. Historical changes whose details are so clearly registered and which leave traces that are so visible are rare indeed.

Great events are generally as much outcomes as points of departure, as much the fruits of chance as of intention.

The birth of Europe represents an absolute beginning, the product of instantaneous creation. On the morning of 9 May, there was nothing, nothing bar the confusion and uncertainty which covered an entire continent that looked on passively while the danger level rose once more. Yet, that evening, a decision had been taken, a process set in motion, a new hope engendered. What had happened?

The Minister of Foreign Affairs entered a state reception room in which over a hundred journalists, seated on rows of chairs that had just been hurriedly put in place, were waiting for him. They saw a shy man who walked with noiseless tread and bent profile, as though he were trying to appear less tall than he was and better to observe his audience over the rims of his spectacles. His shining, dome-like head was especially noticeable. He gave an impression of modesty, and it was in neutral tones that were barely audible that he said ‘Gentlemen, I thank you for coming to hear the announcement that I have to make on behalf of the Government.’ He took his seat behind a table, below the clock that embellishes the monumental fireplace. He began to read out an official paper dealing with relations between France and Germany. This man’s accent was strangely German-sounding for French ears, French-sounding for the Germans. It was known that he had been born on the frontier, that he had studied on one side and made his career on the other; his enemies said that he had worn two uniforms. It was no surprise to hear him speak of Franco-German relations.

In reality, he was speaking of Europe, and, on this fair spring day, he was discreetly laying its foundations. It was the ninth of May nineteen hundred and fifty, and it was six o’clock in the evening in the Salon de l’Horloge at the Quai d’Orsay.

A shy man takes a historic risk

There are no photos, no films, no recording of this press conference which had been hurriedly organised at lunchtime after an exceptionally long Cabinet meeting. Nobody remembered to tell the photographers and soundmen, and the documents that can be seen or heard today are either a simple reconstruction or relate to later ceremonies. This omission was not entirely accidental. The shy man, Robert Schuman, knew that he was taking a historic risk whose success depended on the effect of surprise. You do not set up — or at least at that time you used not to set up — an audio-visual performance in two hours. But those two hours were long enough to call together accredited journalists and, using them, to break the story of a project that had been planned secretly and thus to spread it irreversibly.

That is what it was really about, and the journalists themselves did not know the nature of the announcement that was going to be made to them. Some of them knew only that it would be important because they had in their hands the early edition of *Le Monde* which announced, in its front-page headline: ‘Tomorrow, in London, France is to propose the association of European key industries.’ Some words, the result of a calculated leak, gave more information: ‘It is, we have been led to believe, a bold incentive for the nations of Western Europe to make a new effort towards economic integration.’ But the audience began to doubt the boldness of this proposal as they heard the generous and generalising phrases that the Minister was laboriously reading out. It was only very gradually that the most perspicacious came to distinguish amid this woolly message elements that they could recognise as being surgical instruments. An ailing Europe was

going under the knife.

However, on that Tuesday 9 May, the Cabinet meeting had not displayed the solemnity of a pre-operative conference. Brought forward by one day compared with French practice in order to allow the Minister of Foreign Affairs to leave that same evening armed with instructions for the tripartite conference in London, it had been additionally burdened with a last-minute communication from Robert Schuman. He had not attempted to open a debate. He had simply tried to convince the Council that he could not go, yet again, to meet his Western colleagues, Ernest Bevin and Dean Acheson, without submitting to them a French proposal on Germany, of which he gave them a brief outline. Who took the liberty of questioning the competence of Mr Schuman on the issue, and who raised an objection? Not those members of the Government who, like René Pleven and René Mayer, had been individually prepared and were also in favour of the plan; and certainly not those, the majority, who were hearing of it for the first time and considered that it was, in fact, necessary to make a goodwill gesture. The idea of industrial conglomerates had been in the air for several months. Other terms used were 'condominium' or 'consortium'. So, at lunchtime, the atmosphere was not exactly one of revolt.

Nonetheless, once he had obtained this agreement, Mr Schuman met his associates in a state of some excitement, because he realised that he was about to commit an act of historic importance. For what, that morning, he had minimised the significance of, he now had to magnify. It was by his very nature difficult for this discreet man to make a spectacular gesture. It was painful for him to utter fine words or high-sounding phrases. If he had not been so convinced of the need for action, and of the extraordinary character of his proposal, he would have played down the vivid style of the paper that he was to read in public. But, on the contrary, he accepted it without alterations, and he even added to it: in his office, that afternoon, he wrote in his own hand this fine introduction:

'It is no longer a question of idle words, but of bold action, constructive action. France has acted, and the consequences of its action could be immense. We hope that they will be. France has acted essentially for peace. If peace is really to have a chance, there must first be a Europe.'

The rue de Martignac coup

'France has acted ...' What was behind this vigorous assertion that sounded so alien to our usual diplomatic style? No more than a 120-line text, written a few days before somewhere in the country by someone without any mandate to deal with those matters and read by someone else who had received a copy of it in a train. The upper storeys at the Quai d'Orsay had no inkling of what was being hatched on the ground floor, and the echoes arrived there at the same time as they were spreading in Bonn and Rome. They pretended to be in the know, but they never forgot this reprehensible course of action. On that day, France was not represented by the illustrious, familiar machinery of the administrative services: it was two men acting virtually off their own bat, not, however, without having respected the minimum of constitutional procedure. This minimum was more than enough (had the Cabinet not been consulted?), and yet a whiff of conspiracy was floating in the air. For the man who had written the text, the man without any special mandate, was in the Salon de l'Horloge, mingling with the journalists. His presence threw into stark relief the substance of the ambiguous proposal that dealt both with coal and steel and, at the same time, with European federation.

This man was known above all for his economic exploits. Jean Monnet was then Planning Commissioner. He was known to like simple ideas and to apply himself only to tangible projects.

He had imbued France with a new state of mind — modernisation — and had handed it the means to achieve it — the tools. He had not driven his country into vain efforts to acquire prestige, or even approbation. His aims were neither agreeable nor subtle ones: he was interested exclusively in the basic sectors, and, for five years, he had been obstinately hammering away at the instructions which, in their turn, were to forge the instrument that was to put France back on its feet. Coal and steel led the list of priorities in his French plan, and it surprised nobody to find them at the centre of his European project. Indeed, the statement that day that

‘the French Government proposes to place the whole of the Franco-German coal and steel production under one common High Authority, in an organisation open to participation by other European countries’, together with the unwonted presence of Jean Monnet beside Robert Schuman, gave substance to the expression ‘the rue de Martignac coup’. The Quai d’Orsay had been taken over by commandos from the Planning Commission who, not far away, were working day and night for the internal prosperity of the country. This prosperity, soon to be put at the disposal of a great diplomatic service that was still suffering from anaemia, would allow France to play its part fully in the orchestra of the great powers. But the Quai d’Orsay clearly understood that the tool would be passed on to it once it was forged. It had no use for the smiths, people bereft of social graces.

The diplomats get up too late

That day, the professional diplomats got up too late: in Paris as in London, in The Hague and in Bonn. They had already lost the long-distance race that had been started by inspired ‘amateurs’ — and some of them took 20 years to get over it. Is that why they were so slow to reinforce the powers of the Community? This explanation would be invidious where they were concerned, but the real reason is no less so; it is because they were known to be hostile — atavistically so — to the very principle of the Community that they were kept at a distance from this delicate confinement. For weeks, one word, just one word more or one word less, might alter the course of an idea that was incompletely formulated and hardly out of the realm of intuition. Only the British diplomats, as we shall see, suspected how fragile this improvised creation was, and they at once bombarded it with their neutrons in order to kill off the supranational germ within it. They would have succeeded, and would have saved themselves 25 years of delaying tactics, if it had not been for the vigilance of the idea’s inventors, who told them: ‘To break away from the fatality of History, we have to turn our backs on the tradition of international relations. The French proposal is not negotiable. The method that it suggests is there: take it or leave it.’

Where did this new tone come from? What accumulation of experiences nourished this certainty? This was at the same time a very old and a very recent story.

The very old story was that of the wars that periodically ravaged Europe and of the unending cycle of revenge taken. This has all been said before. But the fact that has been forgotten today cannot ever be overemphasised: five years after the war was over, the French and the Germans had not yet put behind them either the era of mistrust or the practice of arguing from firmly-entrenched positions. The recovery of the German economy, however pacific, worried its neighbours. The ceilings for steel production authorised by the Occupation Statute had been reached. France, alone, opposed their being raised, unlike its English-speaking allies who were not particularly keen to put the brakes on the production of a nation once again firmly under control — firmly and, henceforth, democratically so. The French legal nit-picking could do nothing against this natural evolution, but which government in Paris would have had the courage to give it up and thus expose itself to attacks coming jointly from the nationalist camps of the Right and of the Left?

The stake in the rivalry to dominate the world

Meanwhile, on the other side of the frontier, the German Chancellor, with equal skill and greater pugnacity, was claiming for his people all the rights to international legal status. If he had failed to do so, the vigorous Socialist opposition would have called him to order. Robert Schuman and Konrad Adenauer shared a desire, as well as some deeply personal reasons, to come to an accord — more so than the majority of their fellow countrymen — but reasons of state set them against each another. Four months previously, in Bonn, they had clashed over the Saar imbroglio. The French Minister had been all the more stung by it, as he did not really believe that the Saar could become French, which was what he was expected to claim at all the diplomatic conferences. He knew that the right solution would be the Europeanisation of the coal resources of the Saar, but he struggled in vain to solve the problem of how to organise it.

Divided among itself, Europe was, at the same time, at stake in the rivalry between the Americans and the Soviets to dominate the world. Periodically, the war threatened to degenerate into a planetary conflict: Berlin was a powder keg, and the excessively rapid recovery of the power of West Germany could be the

detonator. When the Russians exploded the atom bomb, it did not bring the sort of comfort that we derive today from the concept of the balance of terror; on the contrary, it made us feel that the Apocalypse was really menacing mankind who had no longer any notion how to conduct itself. The UN had already lost all credit. The conferences of the four Great Powers were confrontations, and even when they met in select bodies, the three Western Allies found it difficult to come to any agreement. For these reasons, their meeting on 10 May in London promised to be a stormy one, because the British and the Americans were going to ask France to endorse the lifting of the heaviest of the controls placed on Germany, a solution that they would have applied in the absence of a constructive suggestion from Paris.

Robert Schuman recalled that, at the most recent meeting of the Three at Washington, in the autumn of 1949, Dean Acheson had concluded: 'We are completely in agreement to entrust our French colleague with the task of determining our common policy with regard to Germany.' Since then, he had been searching for a formula, asking his visitors: 'What is to be done?' Paradoxically, the most generous advice came to him from Germany. On two separate occasions in March 1950, Adenauer sent out an impressive appeal, through his publicist Kingsbury-Smith, Director of INS, the big American agency: 'Union between France and Germany would give new life and a powerful impetus to Europe, which is gravely ill. Complete union would entail the merging of economies, parliaments and nationalities.' It was the continental transposition of the proposal that Churchill had made to France in 1940 at Jean Monnet's initiative.

And Adenauer concluded: 'In this way, the French desire for security would be satisfied and the revival of German nationalism prevented.'

In France, reports of his suggestion were swiftly stifled. 'Not you, or not that,' came the reply to the German Chancellor. 'And anyway, not now.' To be frank, it was never the moment for bold proposals, and, in that period, even Mr Schuman declared: 'We must no doubt envisage transfers of sovereignty, but this will not happen tomorrow ...' Germany had no right to speak, since it was still a minor, and nobody wanted to take the initiative of emancipating it. The situation was blocked. Then, as de Gaulle wrote, came the instigator.

Changing things in order to change minds

In April 1950, Jean Monnet was in the Alps going for long walks, just as he did every year. During the overnight stops at his lodgings, he wrote down his reflections:

'Whichever way one turns in the current situation of the world, one comes up only against brick walls — whether they be the growing acceptance of a war that is seen as inevitable, the problem of Germany, the continuation of the French recovery, the organisation of Europe, or even France's place in Europe and in the world. In such a situation, there is only one way out: a tangible and resolute action concerning a restricted but decisive point, which will bring about a fundamental change and will, step by step, modify the very terms of all the problems taken as a whole.'

This had always been his method: 'to change the context'. He came back to it with his legendary obstinacy, and we have to follow him in his thoughts, even when they appear to repeat themselves, if we wish to understand the origin of the Community:

'We have to change the course of events. To do that, we have to change people's minds. Words are not enough: only an immediate action concerning one essential point can change the current static situation. There must be a profound, clear, immediate and dramatic action which will change things and enable the hopes in which people are beginning to lose faith to become reality.'

Jean Monnet went on to describe the probable scenarios of the Cold War, 'whose essential objective is to oblige the adversary to give ground: the first phase of a real war.' The Americans would want to integrate Germany, as a sovereign nation, to the Western system. The Russians would not accept this. The French would learn the meaning of fear once again. He developed the absurd consequences of this concatenation, which would shatter at once as the result of some violent action. And again: 'We must not seek to solve the German problem, for it cannot be done as things stand. We have to change the facts by transforming them.'

How? ‘... by the creation of common fundamental economic conditions and by the appointment of new authorities that will be acceptable to the nation states.’

That is all, regarding the mechanism. But Jean Monnet was made in such a way that, as soon as his constant reflections led him to the conclusion of a problem, action followed naturally. If he saw no clear solution, he did not persist; it was just that the problem was not yet ripe. What was essential for him was to be convinced that the time had come to do something. What that something was exactly, he would clarify little by little in the course of consultations, trying it out on those around him. When he returned to Paris on 28 April with five pages of his reflections, he had no idea of the form of this ‘new authority’, except that he remembered having discussed it in Algiers during the war together with René Mayer, Robert Marjolin and Étienne Hirsch at a time when people were beginning to dream of a possible future. Details of this dream may be found in an interview that he gave to *Fortune* in 1944: it involved the pooling of the vast deposits of coal and steel under one European authority, to which the individual nations would delegate their sovereignty, in a union which could abolish customs duties, create a large market and prevent national rivalry. ‘But where to start, and how far to go? Could Britain be brought on board? Without it, a united Europe would, all too soon, become a German Europe again.’

The nine drafts

It would appear that the whole of the ECSC and its problems already figure in this plan, but Jean Monnet did not see himself in the role of visionary. In his view, the 1944 dream was one thing, the 1950 reality another. In fact, it was a total rediscovery of the problem, on this occasion under the pressure of necessity, the mother of invention. ‘Profound, immediate and dramatic action,’ he wrote. This left him little time for consulting a restricted circle of people if secrecy were to be absolute, as he believed. He spoke to Hirsch, his closest confidant. As luck would have it, Professor Paul Reuter, Jurisconsult at the Quai d’Orsay, happened to come to rue de Martignac. Monnet tried out one of his ideas on him; the result was so successful that they went through the entire project. Reuter was not allowed to leave, and, over the weekend of 16 April, he made a contribution alongside Monnet and Hirsch to the first draft of the declaration that was read on 8 May.

The historic formulation was there right from the start: ‘World peace cannot be safeguarded without creative efforts on the same scale as the dangers that threaten it. The contribution that a structured and vigorous Europe can bring to civilisation is indispensable to maintaining peaceful relations.’ This formulation was to survive into the ninth and final draft, dated 6 May. Accordingly, it was between 16 April and 6 May that a proposal was drawn up whose every word had been weighed in order to allow those accepting it no turning back and no loophole. From the exegesis of these successive texts, the progress made to the formulation of one constant idea becomes apparent: ‘Breach the rampart of national sovereignty, then lead the European states through the gap towards unity and federation.’ These words of Jean Monnet no longer figure in the later drafts, but their influence is everywhere in them. We read that ‘the international authority’ of the 16 April version has already become on 17 April ‘the common authority’ and, on 27 April ‘the common High Authority’: Reuter’s influence may be felt here. In the third draft, the decisions of the High Authority are to be compulsory, in the sixth they will merely be accepted by the various countries, while, in the eighth, they will bind them: Monnet did not give in. Very quickly, Pierre Uri was let into the secret: the economic part became more rigorous, the style became more elegant. The circle of conspirators closed. It was to open once more to allow Bernard Clappier, Principal Private Secretary to Mr Schuman, to enter.

The proposal was essentially addressed to Germany. But, from the second draft on, it is ‘open to participation by the other states of Europe.’ Its ‘gradual extension to the other areas of the economy’ figured in the original draft. In this way, one can measure, by examining the roots, the ambition of those who planted the first tree of Europe. Coal and steel are visibly no more than a means. The ECSC was not an end in itself; it was not, as some tend to believe today, some desiccated branch of the European family tree: it was the root stock.

Adenauer: ‘I accept wholeheartedly’

On Friday 28 April, Jean Monnet judged that the moment had come to act. They could not wait for a plan

that was perfect: the essential components were already there, and the London meeting was approaching. He wrote to Georges Bidault, the Prime Minister, sending him the text of the proposal that he hoped to see put forward by the French Government. He requested an urgent meeting. On the same day, he saw Bernard Clappier and handed him the text so that Mr Schuman should be in the know.

That same evening, Clappier was at the Gare de l'Est with his Minister, who was leaving for a weekend at Scy-Chazelles: 'Read this paper, it is important.' Jean Monnet never secured the meeting with Georges Bidault that he had requested, but, to make up for it, Clappier telephoned him on the Monday. Mr Schuman had returned, he had read the paper, he had said: 'I'm with you.' He was with them, and resolutely so, but he always acted with great delicacy. He was to allude vaguely to the project at the Cabinet meeting on 2 May, after which Bidault reproached Monnet for not having informed him first of all, and at the proper moment. 'But I wrote to you on 28 April ...' Bidault looked in a drawer and found the letter, which he had apparently not read. The truth of the matter is that, at that very moment, he was nourishing his own grand project for a High Atlantic Council.

The week beginning 3 May was employed perfecting the text, which remained entirely confidential, except for two Ministers, René Plevin and René Mayer, who promised to give their support to it. The industries concerned suspected nothing; they had not been consulted, and neither had the administrations overseeing them. But who was dealing with the main interested party, the man to whom the proposal was directly addressed, Chancellor Adenauer? Mr Schuman was to say later on: 'Such an offer had not been made without the assurance that it would be welcomed.' They certainly were able to presume that it would be, and, in his memoirs, Adenauer only remembers the letter that Mr Schuman had brought to him in the morning of 9 May during the French Cabinet meeting. The Chancellor replied to him at once: 'I accept your proposal wholeheartedly.' But legend has it — and it will not go away — that, on Saturday 6 May, a French emissary had already been seen at the Chancellery. This minor point remains to be clarified. What is more surprising is Mr Acheson's adventure.

Mr Acheson's adventure

On the Sunday, the American Secretary of State stopped over in Paris on his journey to London. Out of courtesy, he asked to meet Mr Schuman. As a result, the latter was faced with a matter of conscience to settle: to talk about everything while concealing the most important issue from his American colleague, whom he would be meeting two days later in order to settle the German question on a basis that was now superseded, would be a somewhat disloyal and clumsy procedure — all the more so since the agreement of the United States would be necessary to authorise Germany, still subject to controls, to accept the French offer. On the other hand, drawing him into the plot would embarrass him and discriminate against the other ally, Great Britain. It was decided that Mr Acheson would be informed under the oath of secrecy and, at the same time, a strong attempt made to win him over. This was not easily done, because the new conspirator saw drawbacks in what seemed to him at first sight to be a new European steel cartel. He needed Jean Monnet's persuasion to be reassured. But the lesson had sunk in: 'If Acheson was able to think that, it is because we have not been clear enough on that point,' said Monnet, who ordered from Uri the note starting 'Unlike a cartel ...' that was attached to the text of the declaration on the Tuesday.

That Tuesday was a painful one for Acheson, who was lunching with Bevin when René Massigli was announced. The French Ambassador had just received, at the same time as the text that he was hearing about for the very first time, the task of informing the British Government of it. Acheson, bound by the oath of secrecy, feigned ignorance, but Bevin was not deceived and, exploding into one of his famous fits of anger, accused him of having plotted in Paris against Britain.

As for the French Ambassador, he was permitted a cold and formal reply: 'Until I have read your proposal more carefully, I have nothing to say concerning it' — as well as a remark off the record: 'I feel that something has just changed between our two countries.' Thus began the Anglo-French discussions regarding what was to be called a few hours later the Schuman Plan. These discussions, which were swiftly to take a dramatic turn and to be extended until 3 June, constitute an episode in themselves that will be recounted in a subsequent article.

Jean Monnet, from London to Bonn

On the evening of 9 May, the scenery changed on the European stage. Historical partitions had fallen without a sound. The press agencies had stolen a march on the ambassadors, and opinion had already been won over when the governments met to deliberate. Once again, Adenauer deemed it unnecessary to call his Ministers together. 'The proposal which has just been put to us', he declared in the afternoon, 'is an initiative that is generous towards us. It is not made up of vague phrases but of tangible proposals founded on a basis of equal rights.' On the morning of 10 May, Count Carlo Sforza, Minister of Foreign Affairs, delivered the agreement of Italy. From then on, that of the Benelux countries was no longer in doubt, although their governments and interested parties would have desired further clarification: the general public, however, was urging them to commit themselves. A Europe of the Six had been constituted almost spontaneously around that of the Two. The fact remains, nonetheless, that, in the minds of the authors of the proposal, only the German acceptance was necessary, and it would have been enough on its own to seal the Community pact. Monnet and Schuman had gambled on Franco-German union and could be heard regretting later on that it had not been more generous, more complete, and, had it been necessary, more exclusive right from the start, for only extreme daring could be the natural reaction to the challenges of 1950. Although an inconceivable idea had been accepted without question, progress of a purely reasonable nature would be refused year after year. So it was the fateful moment for Europe, and the enthusiastic general public was not mistaken.

Henceforth, things had to go quickly. Mr Schuman in London was plagued with specific questions by the British, who assumed that his plan was a brilliantly constructed technical monument. The truth is that he knew no more about it than the three pages that he had read, and the whole dossier went no further than that. He called for assistance on Jean Monnet who, together with Hirsch and Uri, joined him on Sunday 14 May; their arguments were much more dangerous for the British than the procedure that they feared so much. They quickly understood that there was no Schuman Plan but that there was an invincible will to change the relations existing between nations and, heading the list, those between France and Germany. When pressed by Sir Stafford Cripps, Jean Monnet gave the following reply, one that is one of the most important keys to the European history of the last 25 years: 'My dear friend, you have known of my feelings towards Britain for over 30 years, and you cannot call them into question. I hope with all my heart that you will commit yourselves to this enterprise right from the start. But, if this is not to be the case, we shall go forward without you; I am also convinced that, being the realists that you are, you will come to terms with it, once you see that we have succeeded.' The French returned to Paris.

On 23 May, Jean Monnet was in Bonn in Adenauer's office with Bernard Clappier. The minutes, despite being taken by a diplomat, reveal the emotions underlying the meeting. The two men did not know each other, but, on that day, a friendship was born that was to flourish. They agreed that it was essential that they quickly conclude a general treaty. The experts would come later. Even if this method was not respected in the drafting of the treaty and political priorities had to give ground in the face of technical necessity, Adenauer and Monnet were always, by mutual consent, to make an effort to keep to the line that they had fixed for themselves that day. 'Well, Monsieur Monnet,' said the Chancellor as he showed his visitor out, 'if I manage to see this matter through, I think that my life will not have been wasted.'

Two days later, on 25 May, the French submitted a proposal to the British, the Germans, the Belgians, the Dutch, the Luxembourgers and the Italians that they should all meet to negotiate on the basis of the principles and the commitments of the Declaration of 9 May. This first salvo was to trigger a battle of official statements with London which simultaneously expressed and concealed a major conflict of principles and interests. For a quarter of a century, this battle has only known armed truces, and it will be brought to an end officially by the British vote in the next few days.

François Fontaine