

The Schuman Plan and Belgium, as seen by Fernand Dehousse (1952)

Caption: In 1952, writing in the French magazine Notre Europe, Fernand Dehousse, a Belgian Socialist Senator and militant pro-European, sets out the stance taken by Belgium on the Schuman Plan.

Source: Notre Europe. Revue européenne. 1952; 3e année, n° 11-12. Strasbourg: Société européenne d'éditions et de publications. "Le Plan Schuman et la Belgique", auteur:Dehousse, Fernand , p. 90-96.

Copyright: (c) Translation CVCE.EU by UNI.LU

All rights of reproduction, of public communication, of adaptation, of distribution or of dissemination via Internet, internal network or any other means are strictly reserved in all countries.

Consult the legal notice and the terms and conditions of use regarding this site.

URL:

http://www.cvce.eu/obj/the_schuman_plan_and_belgium_as_seen_by_fernand_dehousse_1952-en-c628771c-4919-462d-9051-62a97286cb53.html

Last updated: 05/07/2016



The Schuman Plan and Belgium

by Fernand Dehousse, Professor at the University of Liège, Member of the Belgian Senate

On 11 December 1951, Paul-Henri Spaak resigned as President of the Consultative Assembly of the Council of Europe. As he returned to his seat, once again taking up his mandate as a Representative, he also regained the right to give his views on the problems afflicting Europe with complete freedom. He took advantage of it to paint a striking picture of Europe's situation: the continent carved up at Yalta and Potsdam; revolts against Europe in Asia and Africa; inaction by Britain on the strictly European level.

Europe, said Mr Spaak, lives today 'in fear of Russia and on charity from the Americans'.

This is a truth we should always keep in mind. When we consider the Schuman Plan, that, again, is what we must think of. The Schuman Plan takes us to the heart of the fundamental questions of the organising of Europe, of safeguarding Western civilisation, and of peace.

Since Mr Spaak resigned, the disappointments have gone on mounting up and the confusion and chaos have grown.

We must never forget it: the Schuman Plan is not a miraculous fall of manna from heaven, it is part of a whole range of endeavours being made to organise Western Europe; it is inseparable from them. The events that have taken place since 9 May 1950, when Mr Schuman launched his first proposal, have profoundly affected the very concept we have of the coal-steel pool.

In particular, when we look at it now, we cannot overlook the plan for a European army and the attempts to set up a political federation of Europe, and the problems relating to it. That is why, from the Belgian as well as the overall point of view, it is a legitimate exercise for us to start by considering the whole question of the organising of Europe.

The political threats facing Europe have become more serious, as three categories of facts seem to me to prove.

The first is the political stance adopted by Britain since the return to power of Mr Churchill. While Mr Churchill as Leader of the Opposition looked towards Europe, the Atlantic Pact now seems to be the direction in which Mr Churchill as Prime Minister seems to be directing his chief concerns. The Labour Government was thinking of making Britain an associate of the coal-steel pool. It seems that the connection the Conservative Government has in mind is a looser one. However, the issue on which Mr Churchill has most disappointed us is the European army: he used to be seen as the promoter and instigator of that institution, but now his government refuses to take part in it.

The second category of facts which should worry us is what is happening in North Africa: Britain routed in Egypt, France running into serious difficulties in Tunisia and Morocco. All this makes consolidating the free world a more laborious task.

Lastly, recent debates in the United Nations General Assembly have been characterised by anticolonialism. We are not far away here from the problems of the Schuman Plan; appearances notwithstanding, what would Europe be without its African extension? Belgian public opinion and Parliament are living in an extraordinary fool's paradise as far as developments in colonial questions are concerned. I am afraid they are in for a rude awakening.

The lesson of these three categories of facts is clear: the need for European union is greater than ever. Europeans must unite, first of all to survive, but then so as not to turn in the long run into poor, sad satellites of the United States of America. In this respect the Atlantic Pact, which I accept, poses an undeniable risk if all there is to stand up to the strongest among the partners is a scattering of disunited States.

Should we unite without Britain?

I know that traditionally Belgium shrinks from this in principle. But international policy has to be framed according to the circumstances. The continental States have shown enormous patience and goodwill towards Britain. If we have any chance of winning Britain over in the future, it will not, in any case, be by stubbornly waiting but by moving forward: the British will never rally behind an idea, but one day they will perhaps rally behind the thing itself, if we set it up.

The traditional ways of setting up a union are out of date: namely, in the military sphere, by an alliance; in the economic sphere, by a trade agreement. These classic approaches have an inherent defect: they are precarious. The experience of the past 30 years shows how bankrupt all the major international institutions set up on the basis of the principle of sovereignty are. The very moment one of the major partners shows it lacks a spirit of cooperation, the whole edifice collapses. The League of Nations died of it; the United Nations is paralysed by the veto; as for the institution in Strasbourg, it is a talking shop, with all that that entails, both praiseworthy and limiting in practical terms.

The Schuman Plan answer, integration, is a way of getting round these drawbacks. But it means surrendering sovereignty to a greater or lesser degree and setting up, among the participants, a genuine physical and organic community which makes it impossible to resort to shaking the structure or withdrawing.

We were told that committing ourselves to the Schuman Plan was to take a leap into the unknown. Whenever you have to go forward, whenever you have to innovate, you take a leap into the unknown.

In taking this step, Belgium has some particularly heavy responsibilities. The defection of Britain and the Scandinavian countries leaves us with only six countries to make Europe. However, the three large countries, France, Germany and Italy, are not inclined to go on talking just to each other. This gives Benelux a vital part to play. Obviously, the position Belgium adopts will have a decisive effect on the attitude Benelux takes to the Coal and Steel Community and the European army. Perhaps their awareness of these special responsibilities is what prompted some of our countrymen to be hesitant about the Schuman Plan. But other factors have also played a part: let us not forget the effort we put in for the Marshall Plan and the OEEC, and in the context of the European Payments Union. I think special credit is due to the policy Belgium followed under all its governments in relation to these three organisations. Because we did everything we could, we now feel a sort of reluctance in the face of the extra effort being demanded of us. It is perfectly understandable.

The last point is that we Belgians have a very marked taste for what is practical: we come down hard on over-heavy superstructures, metaphysical constructs, abstract theories and federating combinations, even though they are obviously necessary.

Nor do we like committing ourselves lightly. We have always been concerned to live up to our commitments. That is what lay behind the truly monumental report which my colleague in the Belgian Senate, Minister Duvieusart, produced about the Schuman Plan, which was studied for 17 sittings by the joint Economic Affairs and Foreign Affairs Committees. Several trade union organisations also discussed it at special congresses.

These thorough studies, though, in their turn raised fears among certain people that Belgian accession to the Coal and Steel Community would turn out to be incompatible with our sovereignty. I believe, however, that we need to distinguish scrupulously between national sovereignty and the sovereignty of the State in its relations with other States. The two notions are not welded together. The States most committed to the defence of sovereignty in its most absolute form include the totalitarian powers where national sovereignty, meaning a people's right to equip itself freely with the institutions of its choice, no longer exists. Germany in its pan-German stage and then under Hitler was a case in point. The same applies to Soviet Russia today.

The Schuman Plan encroaches on the international sovereignty of States, as do all international treaties without exception. These days no one any longer disputes the judicial character of international treaties; on

the contrary, the feeling is that international sovereignty, instead of being an intangible bloc, is a bundle of rights whose various elements may be limited. The limitations which flow from the Schuman Plan are certainly more marked than those which flow from other treaties, but they are just as lawful, as long as the contracting States agree to them.

As regards the limitations placed on national sovereignty, the existence of a political assembly for the pool, elected by the people, or appointed at one remove by the national parliaments, means that there is no question of any unaccountability of the High Authority in relation to national sovereignty.

It is true that the Treaty cannot be amended by a Belgian legal act for 50 years, but it is just as true that no treaty, by definition, can ever be amended or abrogated unilaterally. The procedure laid down in Articles 95 and 96 of the Schuman Treaty sets out the arrangements for adjustments and revisions.

Article 25 of the Belgian Constitution, which enshrines national sovereignty, can only be considered in relation to Article 68 of the same Constitution, which grants the King the power to conclude treaties. Paragraph 2 of the latter article has, since 1830, provided for treaties which can bind Belgians individually.

I therefore think that people have quite wrongly exaggerated the objections relating to respect for both international and national sovereignty. The way things are developing in modern times, limitations on sovereignty in both these forms are becoming more and more necessary.

My conclusion from this is that the restrictions on sovereignty we are being asked for are essential and beneficial. They are the starting point not for annihilation of the national personality but for a more effective way of arranging the life of the nation and relationships between States. It is quite wrong to think that such a development kills the idea of a fatherland!

I have devoted a great deal of time in the Belgian Senate to analysing the criticisms which can be made of the various Community bodies. I do not think this is the place to go through those analyses again. But I would like to put the emphasis on a special point: the Council of Ministers of the pool.

This coordinating body did not appear in the original French proposals. It is mainly there because of a Belgian initiative. It had to be established because it is obvious that the action the High Authority takes in regard to coal and steel will have repercussions on all the national economies, and that the Member States' prerogatives in the other sectors of the economy will, in their turn, have repercussions of their own on the coal and steel sector. This Council of Ministers is lumbered with a particularly complicated and cumbersome method of voting, but its existence is a necessary evil. It could not be avoided in the present conditions of the European economy, and its establishment reflects the reluctance of a number of States, including Belgium, to commit themselves fully to the path of supranational organisation. It is, to sum up, a step back from such a type of organisation. The Council will protect France and Germany against any possible coalition of the smaller producers, but it will also protect the latter whenever the voting method requires unanimity.

The reason why the institutional machinery set up by the Schuman Plan may seem rather complicated at first is that it creates an actual super-State in the field it covers. The ordinary apparatus of a State therefore had to be carried across to it, an apparatus which is nowadays so highly complicated.

Some of my countrymen have criticised the fact that the Treaty has been concluded for a period of 50 years. The arrangements it entails and requires cannot be undertaken unless we can be assured of a long period of development. The trend towards concluding international treaties for a long period is in any case becoming more and more widespread.

Even though the Schuman Plan represents the first attempt at a supranational form of organisation, it is not the first time that parliaments in general, and the Belgian Parliament in particular, have considered the question of the compatibility between international treaties and Constitutions. This discussion has come up whenever international law has made any progress, in other words whenever it has encroached on areas

hitherto reserved to the sovereignty of States. The Belgian Constitution does not prohibit supranational forms of organisation. The Act approving a treaty which has to be adopted by the two Houses and ratified by the Head of State introduces this concept constitutionally into Belgian law as soon as Parliament, by its vote, signifies that it regards such a treaty as being in conformity with the Constitution.

The Schuman Plan, however, is not the beginning and end of the organising of Europe. At the risk of outraging its opponents, I will even say that it is only a start. This first step must lead us towards the kind of Europe we should all wish for, a Europe of free political competition, a Europe in which we can continue to enjoy all our opportunities.

It is ludicrous and harmful, when speaking of the ratification the Schuman Plan, to talk about 'forcing people's hands' or a 'necessary evil'. This way of seeing things lacks the drive that is essential. To do great things, we have to take a great leap forward. On the monument to Albert Thomas at the International Labour Office in Geneva there appear these words, which must be our guide and give a spring to our step:

'What human organisations need when they come into being is boldness and faith.'