

Jan van den Brink, The Netherlands and the Schuman Plan (1952)

Caption: In 1952, Jan van den Brink, Netherlands Foreign Minister, publishes an article in the French magazine Notre Europe which sets out the Netherlands' stance on the Schuman Plan.

Source: Notre Europe. Revue européenne. 1952; 3e année, n° 11-12. Strasbourg: Société européenne d'éditions et de publications. "Pays-Bas", auteur:Brink, Jan van den , p. 102-105.

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The Netherlands and the Schuman Plan

by J. R. M. van den Brink, Netherlands Minister for Economic Affairs

The favourable attitude of the people and government of the Netherlands to integration of the European economy in general and, in particular, to the 'Treaty establishing the European Coal and Steel Community', which is the first tangible step in that direction, may be seen clearly from the fact that the Second Chamber of the Netherlands Parliament was not only the first to approve the signing of that Treaty but also did so by a very large majority: only the Communists voted against.

No doubt this outcome results in part from the fact that the Netherlands produces less coal and steel than most of the other Member States. The Netherlands meets some two thirds of its own demand for coal and, upon completion of a plant already under construction, will be able to meet about half of its demand for steel. Moreover, cost prices for these products in the Netherlands are among the lowest of the six countries that have signed the Schuman Plan.

Despite all this, membership of the Coal and Steel Community will involve some sacrifices and new risks for the Netherlands, too.

In my view, therefore, there are more fundamental reasons for the positive reaction to the Treaty in the Netherlands.

A very large number of Dutch people believe that neither the Netherlands nor Europe can look forward to a prosperous future unless Europe overcomes its political and economic divisions. If Europe wishes to continue to play a political and economic role in world affairs and to exert an influence on world affairs, it will have to increase its productivity. But greater efficiency in the social and economic organisation of Europe, and hence greater productivity, cannot be achieved unless prosperity is solidly based on the free movement of goods, services and persons. That is the way to achieve the international division of labour that largely accounts for the impact of the New World in international affairs.

The Netherlands is the world's most densely populated country. That cannot but be an advantage when entering a Community based on a common market with a total population of 160 million. The truth of this, I believe, is nowhere better understood than in the Netherlands, where inland waterway transport, agriculture and industry may be regarded as ingredients of international trade. Situated at the intersection of the international trade routes, the Netherlands understands that its future would be severely limited if it were subjected to a stifling, narrow economic nationalism. My country has always resisted the temptation to pursue a trade policy based on protectionism, even during the Great Depression. Now, too, the people of the Netherlands seem able to recognise, or sense instinctively, exactly where Dutch interests lie. We may of course raise some objections, but in general we understand that the basic thrust of the Community as conceived can only be favourable to our country. Indeed, we even believe that if this path were abandoned, economic nationalism would resurface in Europe, more intensely than ever, ending any prospect of development for the Netherlands, which has — let me repeat — the highest population density in the world.

How, then, will the entry into force of the Treaty establishing the European Coal and Steel Community affect the Dutch economy? To answer that question, we must consider the structure of Dutch industry — both the sector that produces materials covered by the Treaty and the corresponding processing industry.

As we have already seen, the Netherlands produces coal and steel but remains dependent on imports from abroad to meet its full demand. While it is thus an overall coal and steel importer, it nevertheless exports certain coal and steel products — such as unwrought iron and, above all, coke — on a by no means negligible scale. Alongside its production industry, the Netherlands has a large processing industry. The latter is especially important in the light of the industrialisation policy that the Netherlands Government is obliged to pursue in order to create employment for its large and constantly growing population.

The most important aspect for the processing industry is a very regular supply of raw materials at the lowest possible prices. The benefit to the Netherlands of its membership of the Community is primarily that, in regard

to supply and prices, the Dutch processing industry will rapidly be placed on an equal footing with the other Member States. In times of shortages, that is an important consideration. When supplies are plentiful, however, the Dutch processing industry, if not restricted by membership of the Community, could probably secure supplies at lower prices than will now be possible, since the High Authority is entitled to fix minimum prices, where necessary. However, the non-protectionist character of the Community, which has been asserted explicitly, provides guarantees that such minimum prices will not adversely affect the Dutch processing industry. For the Netherlands, the Community's non-protectionist character is of vital importance. What is more, Dutch coal and steel producers have enjoyed no protection in the past, and that has enabled them to achieve very low cost prices.

On the other hand, the fact that the Netherlands will no longer be able to use its export coke in economic and political negotiations with the Member States in order to secure certain major concessions is undoubtedly a sacrifice.

Another major sacrifice that the Netherlands will have to make under the terms of the Treaty arises from its obligation to pay around 20 million into the equalisation fund during a transitional period that will last five years. The money will be used to pay subsidies to Belgium, in particular, in order to enable it to reduce its prices.

For the moment, no one can say how all these factors will play out in practice and how matters will develop when the Schuman Plan is applied. There are, naturally, some uncertainties. Like any human enterprise, the Community is not perfect.

Without any doubt, its implementation will bring to the Netherlands, like all the participating countries, both advantages and disadvantages. Never mind! The people of the Netherlands are convinced that a united Europe is the only basis on which a better future can be built, and they confidently applaud the adoption of the Schuman Plan as the first step in its creation.