

Note from the Dutch Embassy in Brussels (3 February 1951)

Caption: On 3 February 1951, the Dutch Embassy in Brussels drafts a note which describes the reactions of the general public and the Belgian press to the issues surrounding the Schuman Plan.

Source: Internationaal Instituut voor Sociale Geschiedenis, Amsterdam. NVV - J.G. van Wouwe 1945-1973. Stukken betreffende Europese en internationale organisaties. Stukken betr. het Schuman Plan. 1950-1954. Diverse commissie. 1950-1952, 106.

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Public opinion on the Schuman Plan — Belgium (3 February 1951)

(Review by the Netherlands Embassy in Brussels)

Reading the Belgian press superficially, it would be easy to conclude that the Government supports the Schuman Plan and the industries concerned oppose it. In particular, it appears that the coal industry does not intend to accept the pool, which would mean that its special position in Belgium could be dependent on decisions taken outside the 'safe' field of domestic policy.

This view is contradicted, however, mainly by newspapers such as *La Nation Belge*, which have close contacts with the industries in question. This particular newspaper, for instance, considers that the Belgian coal and steel industries agree with the principle of a European pool, but are afraid of some of the consequences it will bring.

What is fairly sure is that there is also not complete agreement in the Government about the desirability of helping to bring the plan to fruition, which explains various critical articles in the press inspired by government ministers or officials.

In fact, the contrasting opinions should be viewed differently. People are not so much for or against the Schuman Plan as such; there are simply two diverging opinions on the political purpose that could lie behind the system. A distinction is often drawn in Belgium between Robert Schuman's original idea and how it has been developed by Mr Monnet. The Schuman idea is seen as liberal — its main aims being market expansion, the coordination and integration of means of production, etc. — while the Monnet idea is seen as socialist and ultimately championing 'nationalisation' (or internationalisation) of the industries.

The industrialists' hopes are pinned on the Schuman idea, while the expectations of those working towards a socialist world order, such as the workers' organisations, are looking to Monnet. In a memorandum to the Government, the Belgian General Workers' Federation has demanded that the organisation created should:

'1. manage the economy in a manner which is the exact opposite of the policy practised by the employers' cartels;

2. [ensure] that the workers' organisations should have close ties with all the governing bodies.'

As with most economic problems in Belgium, this issue too has taken on a domestic policy aspect that could become more prominent in coming months — perhaps not just in the economic press, but also in the general press and in government circles. An argument on the subject has already started between the daily *Le Peuple* and *La Nation Belge*.

The Schuman Plan was originally reported in the press merely as an item of information, and almost exclusively for specialists, but it has now become a problem to which many journalists are turning their attention from time to time. We therefore need to be very cautious about the views expressed in the Belgian press, most of which are based on a rather woolly grasp of the facts and quickly produce widely differing dilettante theories.

It should be pointed out that the economic and financial press has naturally provided more accurate news than the general daily newspapers.

A significant section of Belgian public opinion (the Catholic and liberal section, at any rate) is extremely fearful of handing over part of Belgian sovereignty to a High Authority that could perhaps take decisions on the internal affairs of Belgian industries. So there are the same objections here as those expressed a few months ago in Britain by the Labour Party, which were heavily criticised at the time in the Belgian press.

Now that we are getting down to the practicalities of European integration for the first time, people in Belgium are, of course, coming back to the question of sovereignty.

The socialist section of public opinion, which is more sympathetic to the intrinsic substance of the plan, can actually only agree to it if the coal industry is protected, or preferably if the relatively unproductive mines — Mons, Charleroi and Liège — continue to be subsidised in some way, since lower prices without heavy subsidies mean mine closures, leaving the mining populations in the Borinage and Liège without any source of income.

Given that Belgians have never been very nationalistic and the idea of becoming 'European' actually leaves them fairly cold (they are more concerned about 'self'), they are not prepared to make any major sacrifices, which in the present case would mean bringing their industry into line with the rest of Europe.

All of the above deals with what is being written in the press and how the public — the readers — are reacting to it. I should add, however, that the problem of the Schuman Plan is not something to which the readership and the general masses are paying much attention. There is almost no real public opinion on the subject, but it is clear that a certain section of those concerned see the press as a platform for their views. In any event, because the Schuman Plan is French in origin, it was always likely to get a better reception than if it had come from London or The Hague.

The man in the street is beginning not to care about anything being planned, and of all the plans going around people probably know least about the Schuman Plan.

3 February 1951