

'Reservations on the part of the Benelux countries' from Het Vrije Volk (5 July 1950)

Caption: On 5 July 1950, the Dutch daily newspaper Het Vrije Volk reports on the reluctance of the governments of the three Benelux countries to accept French requests at the negotiations under way in Paris on the Schuman Plan.

Source: Het Vrije Volk. 05.07.1950. [s.l.]. "Reserves van de Benelux".

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Reservations on the part of the Benelux countries

After a week of consultations with their respective governments, the representatives of France, the Benelux countries, West Germany and Italy reconvened in Paris to continue the talks on the Schuman Plan. From the first sessions it would appear that the difficulties which led to the talks being postponed still persist. It is the Benelux countries in particular that seem reluctant to go as far as the French in some respects.

The delegations' discussions with their governments were based on a 'working document' distributed to the members before they left by Jean Monnet, spiritual father of the Plan and senior French delegate. Specifically on behalf of the French delegation, incidentally, not the French Government. This 'working document' for the first time puts more flesh on the bones of the Schuman Plan. And Monnet's text again makes it clear that the French goals are more political than economic. The French do not regard the pooling of Western Europe's heavy industry as an end in itself. They hope, rather, that it will be a concrete embodiment of the political idea of European unity.

The 'working document' thus envisages a supranational authority with considerable powers, whose nine members will be appointed jointly by the participating governments. This body will be accountable to a 'parliamentary assembly', whose members will be chosen by the parliaments of the participating countries. In reality this supervisory body has just one power. It can reject the authority's work and so force its members to resign. Important, but not important enough for one to be able to talk of true parliamentary scrutiny.

The political intention of the French is clear from their proposal that all European countries may join the authority but that they may leave only if all the other members agree. In reality, this means that a country which has once said yes will have to say yes again and go along with the French towards a European federal state. This proviso means that there is effectively no going back.

For the moment views on the French 'working document' are seriously divided. The West Germans and Italians seem willing to go along with the French for the most part. But the Benelux countries have grave reservations about what they see as the almost dictatorial powers with which the French want to endow the supranational authority.

Suspension of the talks was due primarily to the Dutch, who wanted to know exactly how the French envisaged the proposed pooling of heavy industry before committing to the authority. The Belgians have now voiced their own concerns. They are afraid that the Schuman Plan will force them into certain measures reminiscent of a controlled economy. And the fact that production costs in the Belgian coal mining industry are very high, higher even than in France, may have something to do with Belgian objections to an overly powerful supranational authority on which individual governments will have hardly any influence any more.

Both the Dutch and the Belgians want the individual member governments to have more influence than the French intend them to, at least according to their 'working document'. In this regard the views of the Benelux countries appear to coincide to some extent with those of the British.