

## 'Britain stays out for the moment' from Het Vrije Volk (6 June 1950)

**Caption:** On 6 June 1950, the Dutch daily newspaper Het Vrije Volk comments on the United Kingdom's decision not to take part in the proposed European Coal and Steel Community.

**Source:** Het Vrije Volk. 06.06.1950. [s.l.]. "Engeland voorlopig afzijdig".

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## Britain stays out for the moment

The joint communiqué published on Saturday states that the Benelux countries, West Germany, and Italy have accepted France's invitation to hold preparatory talks on the Schuman Plan. Great Britain, although invited, will not be taking part, at least for the moment. The Anglo-French disagreement on the 'declaration of principle' to be published prior to the start of the talks appears to be more than just a difference of opinion over semantics. It has proved to be the rock on which British participation foundered.

The exchange of French and British memoranda on the Schuman Plan became increasingly fast and furious last week. France wanted the countries invited to the talks to state beforehand that they were, in principle, in agreement with the two main points of the Schuman Plan: the pooling of coal and steel production and the establishment of a supranational authority to control those industries. The British were reluctant to make such a declaration in advance, despite emphatic French Government assurances that each country would be entirely free during the talks to step back from that original position. Britain was, and is, unwilling to commit to anything until the details of the Schuman Plan have been worked out to a point where its full political and economic implications can be identified.

The reasons for the failure to agree on this are hard to understand, given the importance of what is at stake. Why, for example, did the French not go along with British Foreign Secretary Bevin's last-minute suggestion that a ministerial conference be convened to seek an interim solution?

To say that Great Britain has now turned its back on a European policy that would require it to relinquish a substantial part of its sovereignty is too simplistic, too one-dimensional. For there is no denying that Great Britain has more at stake in all this than the continental countries concerned. Britain alone produces as much coal as all these countries together and about half as much steel. Meanwhile these industries are increasingly occupying a key position in the national economy, and particularly so in exports. So the supranational authority that the French want to see, which would take its decisions independently of the governments, would have more of an impact on British economic life than on that of the other countries.

Something else that doubtless fuelled British suspicions to a significant extent is the history of the Schuman Plan. It was not so much the fact that Schuman's announcement of his plan was a diplomatic bombshell; what upset the British most is the fact that the plan came as a surprise not only to the general public but also to the British Government, which learned that Schuman had secretly consulted the West German Government and the US Secretary of State, Dean Acheson, first. This sequence of events needs some explanation. What is more, the British certainly have not forgotten last year's heavy speculation against the pound sterling, to which the countries now involved in the Schuman Plan were a party and which in the end forced Sir Stafford Cripps to devalue in order to avoid financial disaster.

Traditional British foreign policy factors also undoubtedly played a part in determining the British position. That is not inconsistent with the points made above. Since 1945 the British have never wanted to go further than international cooperation, with individual governments retaining the last word. This is all the more pertinent in the context of the proposed authority, since the whole question of its democratic accountability is yet to be decided.

In the meantime we have a situation with which no one is happy. So it is a good thing that the Anglo-French exchange of memoranda has not led to a formal breach, and that all doors still remain open.