

Interview with Paul Collowald: the Schuman Declaration of 9 May 1950 (Sanem, 27 and 28 June 2002)

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[Étienne Deschamps] What was your experience of the famous Schuman Declaration of 9 May 1950?

[Paul Collowald] Being in Strasbourg and having witnessed the beginnings of the Council of Europe and, speaking for myself, having been closely involved in European conferences with the Foyer de l'étudiant catholique — the Catholic student clubs — in early 1950 we were watching carefully, because having met Robert Schuman for the first time in August 1949, as I was leaving I realised that the following month, in September 1949, he had a rendez-vous in Washington with what were known as the three allies: the American, Dean Acheson; the Englishman, Ernest Bevin; and he, Robert Schuman. They were the trio of the Western allies and they were to meet outside the United Nations to tackle... tackle what? Well, in response to this huge question mark, henceforth the Germans, since they then had a Parliament, were to have a Government — no one yet knew which — then the democratic process would lead to a coalition, with an opposition, and so forth; so, in this context, what was to come of the problems involved in the dismantling process, the issue of the Ruhr, and the issue of the Sarre? This all needed a lot of thought before a decision was taken on what to do, because there were all sorts of plans afoot aimed at reducing Germany to an exceedingly modest state. This September meeting took place in Washington within a few hours of the election in Bonn of Konrad Adenauer as the first Chancellor: on the 20 September or thereabouts. Well. At that point, there were two new factors: Konrad Adenauer was the first Chancellor, and as a result the interlocutor of the three Western Allies, in Washington; what was happening between these three figures?

Here, too, I should like to shatter some commonly-held beliefs. I have read a number of things about this Fourth Republic: pitiful. Very well. Ephemeral coalitions, and so on; these French going to Washington, begging for credit; very well. But just imagine: on that day, the 20 September 1949, while Acheson, Bevin and Schuman were together — and I heard this from a witness, Bernard Clappier, the Head of Robert Schuman's Private Office — at length, Dean Acheson turned towards Robert Schuman, for whom he had a lot of respect, and said, while looking at Ernest Bevin: 'Listen, we are going to meet in London in the Spring' — and he set a date for the 10 May — 'when we shall take some decisions (on the post-war situation, the German issue, and so on). Let us give this task to our colleague Robert Schuman, who, after all, is in the front line, and as a Frenchman from Lorraine, he knows the Germanic world thoroughly; we shall ask him to propose something for us.' Bernard Clappier told me that Dean Acheson heard Ernest Bevin emit some kind of grunt, then Dean Acheson said: 'Very well then, that is settled.' When Bernard Clappier recounted this anecdote he added: 'Mind you, he did give Ernest Bevin a bit of a shove.' All the same, this goes to show — and this is why I referred to commonly-held beliefs — it was the American Foreign Minister who asked Robert Schuman to propose something regarding the German issue, the post-war situation, and so forth. It is a historical truth, but I have not seen it highlighted very often. In short, the 10 May... To come up with a proposal for the 10 May — as I said, in the press we were all watching carefully, but nothing happened. Chancellor Adenauer, in March, I think it was, had floated a plan, but Germany was not in a position to float a plan, obviously not.

Here, therefore, was this extraordinary thing: these two extremely different men. There was Jean Monnet, with his remarkable background: in his youth he had effectively been a salesman working for the family, selling cognac all over the world; he had been Deputy Secretary-General of the United Nations; he had played a part in Roosevelt's Victory Program; he was in de Gaulle's first French Committee of Liberation in Algiers... He was also Commissioner-General of the French Planning Commission, appointed by de Gaulle to put the French economy back on its feet again after the war. So there was Jean Monnet, from the Charente region, a small, not in the least eloquent man, alongside Schuman, who was much taller, from the Eastern Marches with his background and his slight Moselle accent; these two men — again, I find, I have read a number of things where there has been an attempt to pit one against the other: 'It was Jean Monnet who was behind the Schuman Declaration, it was Jean Monnet who invented it, and so on.' Right. It is quite simple, Jean Monnet, as a member of the Planning Commission, was bound to take an economic approach, but in the political context, what would happen there? How were they to deal with the post-war phase? Whilst in Algiers, in August 1943, he had drawn up a document precisely on the post-war phase. Working with his team, he wrote a memorandum of about six or seven pages, seeking ways to solve the problems involved in

the post-war period, and particularly the German issue. He sent this to the Prime Minister as a matter of courtesy — Georges Bidault was the President of the Council — and at the same time he tried to contact Bernard Clappier, who was the Head of Robert Schuman's Private Office. However, they were not able to meet; Bernard Clappier then pointed out to Jean Monnet that the week-end of the 1 May was approaching and his minister was going to go back to the Moselle, to Scy-Chazelles, ten kilometres from Metz, for a short rest. On 29 April 1950, he went with his boss, Robert Schuman, to the Gare de l'Est, and said to him: 'I have just seen Jean Monnet and he told me: "Talk to Schuman about it." Here it is.' Schuman took it to Scy-Chazelles and meditated on it for 48 hours. He said: 'It is splendid; it just needs to be given a political touch. As Minister, I have to take the responsibility — in quotation marks — of selling this to my colleagues and to my Government.' This is because the Foreign Minister cannot take an initiative of this type without its being ratified, and we had left for ten days — just under ten days — I was about to say for the longest week in Europe. Schuman returned to Paris and said: 'I will take charge of it.' That Wednesday he spoke of it to the Council of Ministers, as follows: 'Look, you are aware that the order must be changed. On 10 May, I must be in London; you will recall that there is to be a meeting there. Well, we are going to make a proposal.' Bidault: 'Very well then, that is agreed.' He had left it in the drawer... Meanwhile, there was one draft, then a second, then there were eight drafts of the text, the text was ready on 8 May and at that point Robert Schuman decided that they were really up against the ropes. In order for to be in London for the 10 May, the Council of Ministers, which had been brought forward 24 hours, had to approve on 9 May what was to become the Schuman Declaration.

It was not just the beginning of the ECSC, it was an immense political adventure, for it contained Franco-German reconciliation expressed in the most precise and strongest terms, the outline of a political plan and even more, since it is said that there were also the bases for a future European federation. The phrase 'European federation' is in the text twice — I am sorry there are no more — it is not just a concoction of coal and steel, it is a grand political plan and that too, incidentally, is sometimes forgotten. Schuman knew that it could only succeed with the support of the Germans. If it did not work at Bonn, too bad, they would have to drop it. That is when the photo I referred to was taken, in which Robert Schuman can be seen with Maurice Couve de Murville and Robert Mischlich. This Robert Mischlich was bilingual, and Schuman sent him to Chancellor Adenauer with the substance of the Schuman Declaration that he was to present to the Council of Ministers before holding a Press conference afterwards. He sent him to Bonn in the greatest secrecy, and on that subject, I must say, the combination of history and anecdote is always amusing: in Bonn, who was the French Government represented by? By Ambassador François Poncet, who bore the title of High Commissioner, etc., and represented France there. But nobody told him about it! Nobody told him about it! This really came from the decision taken at the political level by Robert Schuman to ignore the Quai d'Orsay, which was against the project — it did not quite correspond to the policy they had maintained ever since Richelieu's time — and then the dialogue between Robert Mischlich and Adenauer was so positive... Adenauer said: 'But this is marvellous! I shall call a Press conference for this afternoon.' Mischlich pleaded with him: 'I beg of you, Chancellor, above all, do not do that, for it has to go before the Council of Ministers between twelve-thirty and one o'clock this afternoon in Paris.' This was the morning of 9 May, in Bonn. 'All right then.' So Mischlich telephoned Bernard Clappier, Head of the Private Office, who was on tenterhooks, and who, in turn, informed Robert Schuman; they were in the Council of Ministers and Bidault was about to end the session, since the agenda had been dealt with, by saying: 'Oh yes, Schuman wanted to add one item.' OK, Konrad Adenauer was enthusiastic. Then Schuman outlined the affair, very quickly, apparently, without saying: 'I am pleased with myself', in order to have the go-ahead. It was the 9 May, half past midday, a quarter to one, and the following day they had to be in London with a plan. As I said — it is an interesting anecdote — the ambassador, François Poncet, had been ignored.

Well, there is another that I have pieced together in the meantime. The son of François Poncet, Jean-François Poncet, whom I met, was Secretary-General at the Élysée palace at one time as well as French Foreign Minister, and he married someone from the Wendel family, in Lorraine. One day — I do not recall the circumstances, but I think it was in Thionville at a European meeting — I was telling the story to her husband, and she said: 'Yes, father was absolutely furious. He was in the train when he learnt that there was going to be, or that there had been, the Schuman Declaration and the Press conference.' So he had ignored the Quai d'Orsay and he had not taken part, as they say, in wide-ranging consultations. For Schuman — and this is why I say that there was this convergence and this link with Jean Monnet — for Robert Schuman had

absolute confidence in the file that had been put together so well technically by Monnet, who had contacted the iron and steel industry, the collieries and so on, because they could not just set off like Don Quixote, could they? Schuman knew that. So those are the ingredients, and there you have the reply to the famous question: 'Who was the father of the Schuman Declaration? Was it Monnet or Schuman?' Well, it is quite simple! The mass of the good work done on the file and its structure to ensure that it held water economically and legally, was performed by Monnet and his team. However, when it comes to files like that, I know of a score that have ended up in the dustbins of history. It was Schuman who was responsible politically for ensuring that the French Government endorsed it and, later on, fought for it. It all started — when I say 'fought', perhaps it is too strong a term, but when the reply came from Benelux, with agreement by Belgium, agreement by Italy, and also, with some reservations, by the Netherlands — it started with just one plus five. The Germans, or rather Konrad Adenauer, had said 'yes'. They were only six. So, if you were to ask: 'A "little Europe" of six — should we not persuade the English to agree?' But, of course, just as Schuman did with Bevin, Monnet, who possessed an admirable host of acquaintances in London, did all he could to persuade the English in May and June 1950. What if Schuman had sold off the essentials of the plan for a mess of pottage? We should not be talking now about the Union European or the European Community, because we should have ended up with a friendly free-trade area and basta, that's it. That is the way that the story would have gone. The conclusion to be drawn is that at a certain point one has to take political responsibility — the political will must be there — and if one cannot do everything with everyone at once, one must go ahead with those who want to go along with it. I believe that on occasions this is still relevant some years afterwards.