

Parliamentary debates in the House of Commons on the British position on the Schuman Plan (13 June 1950)

Caption: On 13 June 1950, British MPs hold a debate in the House of Commons over the possible consequences of the Schuman Plan and the United Kingdom's attitude to the forthcoming negotiations on the coal and steel pool.

Source: Parliamentary Debates. House of Commons-Official report. First session of the Thirty-Ninth Parliament of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland. 14 George VI. Dir. of publ. Hansard. 1950, No 476; fifth series. London: His Majesty's Stationery Office.

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URL:

http://www.cvce.eu/obj/parliamentary_debates_in_the_house_of_commons_on_the_british_position_on_the_schuman_plan_13_june_1950-en-73660862-e59e-43f7-a3bb-964141a9d830.html

Publication date: 20/10/2012

Schuman Plan (Anglo-French discussions) (13 June 1950)

The Prime Minister: I desire, with permission, to make a statement in reply to Question 49.

On the afternoon of 9th May, the French Ambassador informed the Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs that the French Government had prepared a proposal for the pooling of the French, German and other European coal and steel production and that a public statement would be issued by the French Government on this subject in the course of the day.

His Majesty's Government appreciate that there were good reasons for seeking to achieve the greatest possible impact for this new departure in Franco-German relations and the method was justified by the enthusiastic welcome which the statement received on the German side.

It is not my intention on this occasion to give a detailed account of the exchanges of view which subsequently took place between His Majesty's Government and the French Government. His Majesty's Government have thought it appropriate, in view of the high importance of the matter, to publish the relevant documents without delay. The agreement of the French Government has been obtained and a White Paper is being laid before the House today. I only wish now to make one or two comments.

It became perfectly clear in the course of informal discussions between M. Monnet, the Chief Planning Officer of the French Government, and British officials that while the French Government had not worked out how their proposal would be applied in practice, their views on the procedure for negotiations were definite. They were that Governments should accept at the outset the principles of the pooling of resources and of a high authority whose decisions would be binding on Governments, and the next step should be the conclusion of a treaty in which these principles would be embodied. Shortly thereafter the French Government secured the agreement of the German Government to the proposed basis on which the negotiations should proceed. This fact naturally determined the course of the subsequent exchanges of view between the two Governments and made difficult the achievement of His Majesty's Government's desire to play an active part in the discussion of the French proposal but without commitment to the acceptance of its principles in advance. His Majesty's Government fully appreciate the reasons for the procedure adopted by the French Government, and this has not affected in any way His Majesty's Government's attitude of approval and support for the French initiative.

The consequences, as far as His Majesty's Government are concerned, were stated in the communiqué which they issued on 3rd June, and from which I quote the following passage:

"His Majesty's Government do not feel able to accept in advance, nor do they wish to reject in advance, the principles underlying the French proposal.

They consider that a detailed discussion, which would throw light on the nature of the scheme and its full political and economic consequences, is a normal and, indeed, essential preliminary to the conclusion of a treaty. They feel that there is a substantial difference of approach between the two Governments as to the basis on which the negotiations should be opened. An unhappy situation would arise if, having bound themselves to certain principles without knowing how they would work out in practice, they were to find themselves, as a result of the discussion, compelled to withdraw from their undertakings. They have accordingly, to their regret, found it impossible, in view of their responsibility to Parliament and people, to associate themselves with the negotiations on the terms proposed by the French Government."

The position is therefore clear. His Majesty's Government will be kept regularly informed of the course of the negotiations which will open on 20th June between the French, German and other Governments. They themselves had initiated studies of the French proposal immediately it was put forward and these studies will continue. But there is no question of putting forward any alternative British proposal at the present time. It would not be right to take any step which might be regarded as a diversion or as an attempt to modify the course which the French and other Governments have decided to take. His Majesty's Government desire to help and not to hinder in this matter, and the manner in which they can best do so will only appear after the negotiations have begun.

I am sure that the whole House will hope that the practical working out of the scheme will show ways by

which the United Kingdom may be able to associate itself with this valuable piece of European co-operation.

I conclude with two points. In its attitude to a proposal of this kind His Majesty's Government must have in mind the basic economic needs and security of the country and the necessity to ensure that the United Kingdom is in a position to discharge its responsibilities in every part of the world.

Secondly, the discussion of the French proposal has naturally tended to obscure from view the steady progress which is being made towards greater unity of action among the democracies in the political, strategic and economic fields. In European and other international organisations there is a continual process, supported and, indeed, often led by United Kingdom representatives, by which governments are increasingly merging their interests and restricting their individual freedom of action. Throughout the last three years a continuous effort has been made to build up and consolidate by every means the strength and solidity of the West. Now, as a result of the recent conferences in London we are, I believe, about to enter a formative and decisive phase in the organisation of the Atlantic Community. This will require, by a more effective pooling of resources, the surrender in an unprecedented degree by each country of the ability to do as it pleases. His Majesty's Government will be in the forefront of this great endeavour.

Mr. Harold Davies: While thanking my right hon. Friend for that full statement, which I am sure is appreciated on both sides of the House, may I ask him how it was that Mr. William Hayter was able to say that 90 per cent. of the people of Britain approved this plan before even this House had had an opportunity of discussing it? Might I further ask that whatever line we take we shall say that no supra-national authority will be allowed to interfere with the Socialist Government's planning for full employment? [HON. MEMBERS: "Oh!"] Why not?

The Prime Minister: I am not aware that Mr. Hayter gave expression to anything except general approval of the plan.

Mr. Churchill: I am sure that we have all listened with great interest to the statement which the Prime Minister has made. May I ask him if this statement has been collated with or is to be read in accordance with the other statement issued this morning by the National Executive Committee of the Labour Party?

The Prime Minister: The Labour Party document to which the right hon. Gentleman refers is a general statement of party policy, and it sets out, in the section on the problem of the basic industries, what the party considers to be the ultimate necessities of a fully developed scheme of European co-operation in this field. But the Government have always made clear both at the O.E.E.C. and elsewhere that they are fully prepared to co-operate in the closer integration of the European economy with other countries which hold different economic views. The Labour Party document is not, of course, a statement of Government policy in this matter. Government policy is as I have just now stated.

Mr. Churchill: It is evident, I am sure, that we should have a discussion on this matter at an early date. It is very complicated, and we have two versions presented to us of the policy of the party opposite. There are also many difficult aspects of this question. May I ask the right hon. Gentleman if we can have a Debate on this matter next week? I do not think it should be left too long in view of the uncertainties there are. May I also ask whether the Prime Minister will publish a White Paper—I think he intends to do so—containing the text—

The Prime Minister: I do not think that the right hon. Gentleman quite caught what I said. I said that a White Paper was being published. It was available at 3.30 this afternoon.

Mr. Churchill: I am very much obliged. I presume that the Prime Minister will give us an opportunity of discussing this matter next week. I am sure that everyone will welcome the opportunity. Meanwhile, may I assure the right hon. Gentleman of the sympathy we all feel with him in his position as the only Socialist Prime Minister, outside the Iron Curtain and Scandinavia, in the whole of Europe, the whole British Commonwealth of Nations or the whole of the English-speaking world.

The Prime Minister: Regarding the last point of the right hon. Gentleman, I would remind him that during the war he was the only Conservative Prime Minister among the Allies and in the British Commonwealth and he was indebted to strong support from the Labour Governments in the Commonwealth. With regard to his first question, perhaps the Lord President of the Council will reply.

Mr. Churchill: I would assure the right hon. Gentleman that I was only expressing my sympathy with his loneliness.

The Prime Minister: I shall fortify myself by the example of the way the right hon. Gentleman stood up to it during the war.

Mr. H. Morrison: In reply to the Leader of the Opposition, by all means let this be discussed through the usual channels, but I am bound to say that the real difficulty which will affect both sides of the House is that at this stage we do not know what is the scheme—none of us does—and consequently we shall be in some difficulty in discussing it through the usual channels.

Mr. Eden: Perhaps I might ask the right hon. Gentleman to bear in mind that what we would like to discuss is not only the Schuman Plan, but also the document which has just been presented to us.

Mr. Morrison: If I may say so, that is partially rather a quaint proposition; but in any case the real issue before the House is the Schuman Plan and we are all in the difficulty—all of us on both sides of the House—that we have not yet got the details. I quite agree that as soon as adequate details are available, an opportunity ought to be available to the House to debate it. But in any case it can be discussed through the usual channels, and we can see what we can agree or what we cannot agree.

Mr. Churchill: The question of having any Debate, and so on, is suitable to the usual channels, but Parliament has its rights in regard to whether large questions should be debated on particular occasions; and is not this exactly the topic on which the House of Commons should express an opinion? May not we have an assurance—apart from any discussions through the usual channels—that we will be given an opportunity next week when we can discuss this matter?

Mr. Morrison: I cannot give an assurance about a day next week. I do say it is quite proper that at the right time Parliament should discuss it—

Mr. Churchill: The right hon. Gentleman is not the judge.

Mr. Morrison: I quite agree with the right hon. Gentleman. If the right hon. Gentleman wants to be the only judge, then the course is perfectly clear. He can take a Supply Day for the purpose as soon as one is available. On the other hand, I am not laying down a dogma when I say that when the House debates the Schuman Plan it would be an advantage if we had the details so that we would know what we were talking about.

Mr. Clement Davies: What has been put by the right hon. Gentleman is a matter of such importance that it is regarded by many of us as being the most important step which has taken place since the termination of the war, and it is pre-eminently a matter upon which the House is entitled to express its views while other nations are meeting and we are not there. Could not the Leader of the House say that next week we could have a full Debate, and not limit it to a mere Supply Day?

Mr. Morrison: I say that we can discuss it through the usual channels, but it really will not be effective if the House debates vague and indefinite proposals. Nevertheless, it is a great idea which I am not, and which the Government and my right hon. Friend are not, rejecting out of hand. But really the House ought to have some degree of detail as to the scheme; otherwise we shall be wasting our time.

Mr. Churchill: Does not the proposal suggested by the right hon. Gentleman give him or the Government absolutely indefinite power of delaying a Debate on this matter? They have only to say, "We do not know all

the facts and so we will put off the Debate." But the House is the judge and not the Government of whether a Debate should take place upon a grave public matter, and I ask expressly and explicitly that this matter should be discussed next week. As to the right hon. Gentleman saying, "Take one of your Supply Days," that really is not worthy of a Government which, although it has only a majority of four or five, still presumes to rule over these vast spheres.

Mr. Morrison: The right hon. Gentleman is really once more being unreasonable. I do not presume always to be expressing the opinion of all the Members of this House, and I wish that the right hon. Gentleman would not always assume that he is speaking for the whole House. There is a difference of opinion about this, and all I say at the moment is that it would be better for the House to debate it when we have more information and know what we are talking about. However, the right hon. Gentleman is quite right; the resources of Parliament are considerable, and if he insists upon a Debate, and if he wants to force the issue and have it on a certain day, then we will meet him on a Supply Day; but if the Government are giving the time, the Government must have the right to consider when the time is appropriate.

Mr. Rhys Davies: Can the Prime Minister at this stage give an answer to a question about the Schuman Plan which bothers some of us? There are three-quarters of a million coal miners in this country who are now employed by the National Coal Board; who will be their employer if the Schuman Plan comes to completion?

The Prime Minister: That brings out the difficulty of discussing this plan. There are no details whatever. This is a sketch of a great idea, but it has not yet been filled out in any detail, and I cannot give an answer to that.

Mr. Bellenger: May I ask the Prime Minister whether he has given consideration to the effect that these discussions between Germany and France will have on the present arrangements on a tripartite basis for considering and agreeing on matters relating to Germany?

Mr. Eric Fletcher: In view of the fact that the French Government have nominated a very senior official as liaison officer to keep the British Government informed about the day-to-day negotiations during these meetings in Paris commencing next week, and in view of the importance of the Government being informed of the negotiations as they develop, will the Prime Minister appoint somebody on behalf of the British Government to act as liaison with the French and other Governments?

The Prime Minister: Full arrangements have already been made for complete liaison in this matter.

Mr. Donner: Is not it perfectly plain from what has been said by the Prime Minister and by the Lord President of the Council that the Government are most anxious to avoid a Debate on this all-important matter?

Mr. Bellenger: May I have a reply to my question?

The Prime Minister: I could not quite understand the question of my right hon. Friend the Member for Bassetlaw (Mr. Bellenger).

Mr. Harold Davies: In view of the fact that the House has demonstrated its keen interest in this problem, will the Prime Minister endeavour to bring to the notice of France the intense interest of the House in the problem, and ask the French authorities to give us detailed information to discuss intelligently in this House; and then give us an opportunity to debate it?

The Prime Minister: In a matter of this kind it really is not for us to ask the French Government to put themselves out for the convenience of this House. This House should debate the matter at the right time when they get the information, and in due course we shall get notice from the French Government.

Mr. G. B. Craddock: May I ask the Prime Minister whether, before the Government replied to the

invitation of M. Schuman, there was any consultation between His Majesty's Government and other members of the British Commonwealth?

The Prime Minister: I do not think there was time for any consultation. This is a specific invitation addressed to His Majesty's Government.

Mr. John Hynd: Will not the Leader of the House reconsider the question of a Debate, in view of the fact that it is clear from the questions put this afternoon and the answers given that this is regarded as one of the most important issues at the present moment, and that there is considerable misunderstanding on the Continent and in this country about it? We have been told by the Government, in the first place, that they accept the principle of this and regard it as a most important issue, and we have just been told by the Leader of the House in quite other terms that they have not rejected it out of hand—which is not at all reassuring. In view of the fact that this has aroused so much interest in the Press and this House, do not the Government consider it is desirable, irrespective of the presence of detailed information, that the broad principle and the very wide implications of this plan should receive full consideration in this House, so that the French and other Governments, and the people abroad and in this country, can understand precisely what is the British feeling in this matter?

Mr. Morrison: My hon. Friend is falling into the same error as the Leader of the Opposition. If there is to be a Debate, the House will naturally expect to have the views of the Government on this proposal. I must be absolutely frank with the House. We cannot express a firm view when the material elements and reasonable details are not available. This is a matter of great importance which affects the livelihood of millions of our fellow countrymen and others. We cannot discuss it in the void as if we were debating the programme of the Liberal Party.

Mr. Churchill: Is it not, instead of a discussion of these detailed proposals, rather an account which we require of the negotiations which have taken place and of the Government's action and policy and the general principles by which they will be guided in any discussion of detail?

Mr. Morrison: As to the negotiations, the right hon. Gentleman will find that they are fully reported in the White Paper.

Mr. Edelman: Will the Prime Minister confirm that, while having reservations about the structure of the particular authority proposed by M. Schuman, His Majesty's Government give their full support to the idea of a European coal and steel organisation which will have as its object the co-ordination of these industries in the interests of full employment and general European well-being?

The Prime Minister: If the hon. Member will read the statement I have made in this House, he will see that the attitude of His Majesty's Government is perfectly clear. We accept this as a great idea, but it is quite impossible for us at present to accept it in all its details—or indeed the exact principle—before we know how it will work out in fact.

Mr. Eden: While I understand that it may be difficult for the Government to add to what they have already said, is not it desirable that on an issue of vast importance, accepted as such by every nation, and by the whole House, Members should have the opportunity to express their views both on the actual statement and on the White Paper?

The Prime Minister: I entirely agree. The only point we have made is that if it is to be a fruitful discussion it should be a discussion on definite proposals. I do not know whether the right hon. Gentleman can see the implications of this scheme or indeed the general framework of the scheme at present. I cannot. I think we should do better when we know more about it. That is the only point. There is no intention whatever of avoiding a Debate. This is a matter of very great importance to this country, to Europe and to the world. If the right hon. Gentleman will consider the matter carefully, I think he will see that a mere Debate in the void on some general question of what we can do on this matter would not take us very far without seeing more in detail what the French Government have in mind.

Mr. Churchill: Surely it may be a long time before the French Government, having had only preliminary *pourparlers* with other countries, are in a position to state their detailed proposals? Are not the detailed proposals of the French Government to be put forward as a basis of discussion among a large number of Powers to be assembled round a table? How long is all that going to take? Are we really to be denied a Debate in Government time upon an issue of this importance?

The Prime Minister: I understand that the meeting is to take place on the 20th.

Mr. Clement Davies: A proposal has been put forward and accepted by the French and the Germans. That proposal, to take part in a round-table conference, has been turned down. The Government refuse to take part in it, but are awaiting details. Surely, the action of the Government in refusing to take part is debatable by this House. It is a matter upon which the House is entitled to express an opinion. I understand that one other country—Holland—has agreed to take part subject to certain conditions. Why could not action of this kind have been considered by the Government? Surely, those are matters which the House could debate and discuss.

The Prime Minister: If the right hon. and learned Gentleman will read the White Paper, he will see exactly what took place. If the right hon. and learned Gentleman thinks that we should have accepted this position and bound ourselves to agree to something about which we had no details, that is a matter which he might debate; but as I understand the position, the general view expressed in this country is that we should like to see more details before we bind ourselves. It was not the case that we refused to go to a round-table conference. We were perfectly willing. We were not prepared to go to a round-table conference binding ourselves to do certain things which we might have found we were not able to do.

Mr. Churchill: Would not it be very easy and appropriate for the right hon. Gentleman to expound at greater length in a Debate what he has just been saying in answer to the last question? The Government have to declare and explain their conduct in relation to these matters as far as they are known to us. To say that we shall have to wait until the cut-and-dried detailed proposals agreed upon by all the different countries can be placed before us is, I think, very abusive treatment.

The Prime Minister: All I say to the right hon. Gentleman is that he is again mistaken about what I said. I never suggested that we should wait until agreed and cut-and-dried proposals have been reached by all the Governments. What I did suggest was that we might see what was the actual scheme put forward. I suggest that if the right hon. Gentleman would read the White Paper first of all, he would see the course of the discussions. My statement today will not add much to what is in the White Paper, which sets out, I think very clearly and in a way which can be understood on both sides, exactly the reasons why we could not go in with our hands bound.

Mr. Churchill: I was not prejudging the issue, because it requires very careful consideration in many of its different aspects, but I do ask that we should now have a Debate next week promised to us. It would be a proper thing in a matter of this extreme importance for the Government to have the Debate in their time.

Sir Richard Acland: Might it not be useful to take an early opportunity of making a statement in some form showing what are some of the details which His Majesty's Government would like to see included in the working out of this great idea, so as to make it easier for us to associate ourselves with it?

The Prime Minister: We do not want to embarrass the discussions by putting forward proposals ourselves at this time.

Mr. Hugh Fraser: Is not it strange that through their *alter ego* the Socialist Party, the Government are prepared to discuss this matter with other international Socialist Parties during the coming weekend, but they are not prepared to discuss it in this House?

Mr. Blackburn: On the question of consultation with Dominion Governments, while fully understanding

that it has been impossible to do this so far, might I ask the Prime Minister to take steps to see that Dominion Governments are consulted, and is it not clear that they are fully entitled to be informed?

The Prime Minister: They have been kept fully informed all the time. The general practice in these matters has been stated over and over again. On matters of this kind Commonwealth Governments are kept fully informed. It is up to them, if they wish to make any statements or suggestions, to do so.

Sir Peter Macdonald: If it is impossible to make any decision on participation in the Schuman Plan without further knowledge of the scheme, what justification have the Government for making it known, as it is pretty well known on the Continent, that the reason they will not participate is because other countries do not share the same Socialist ideology as they do?

The Prime Minister: It is not pretty well known on the Continent. It happens to be entirely contrary to fact.

Mr. Julian Amery: If there was enough information available for the Government to decide to refuse the invitation from the French Government, then is there not enough information for the House to debate whether the Government were right or wrong?

Mr. Gammans: Why was it necessary to give such an immediate answer to the French Government, when proper consultations could not have taken place with the Dominions? Consultations would only have taken two or three days? Why was it necessary to reply so quickly?

The Prime Minister: Because the French Government asked for a decision by a certain time.

[...]