

Letter from Oliver Harvey to Ernest Bevin (Paris, 19 May 1950)

Caption: On 19 May 1950, Oliver Harvey, British Ambassador to Paris, writes to Ernest Bevin, British Foreign Secretary, to outline the possible political consequences of an acceptance or rejection of the Schuman Plan by the United Kingdom.

Source: The National Archives of the United Kingdom, [s.l.], Kew, Richmond, Surrey, TW9 4DU.

<http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/>, Records of the Cabinet Office, CAB. Anglo-French discussions regarding French proposals for the western European coal, iron and steel industries; Schuman plan, CAB 21/3235.

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URL: http://www.cvce.eu/obj/letter_from_oliver_harvey_to_ernest_bevin_paris_19_may_1950-en-c734bbef-dd20-4127-aea6-a7a43aac43d.html

Publication date: 14/09/2012

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(No. 324. Confidential)Paris,

Sir19th May, 1950.

In his dispatch No. 312 of 15th May, Mr. Hayter described the origin of the Schuman-Monnet Plan for placing under common control the steel and coal industries of France and Germany and of the other countries who adhere to it, and the press reactions which it has provoked. Whilst leaving aside its effects on British economy and whether or not the United Kingdom should adhere, which I am not competent to discuss, I would wish now to draw attention to some of the wider implications of the Plan and the political consequences of its acceptance or rejection.

2. The French Government, in proposing the plan, can claim to have taken a bold step forward in the direction in which they have been constantly urged to go, that of taking the lead in reconciling Germany with France and Western Europe. They have heeded at last the persistent prodding both of yourself and of Mr. Churchill, as well as of the Americans. They have made a move which has gratified the Germans and won the approval of the Americans as well as of the advocates in all countries of closer European Union.

3. At the same time, the French Government believe that they have found the means of protecting French economy from the effects of reviving German competition in Europe which has for long cast its shadow across Franco-German relations. Furthermore and more important still, the plan, if adopted, must go far towards exorcising French fears of the military and political consequences of German recovery. The stubborn French resistance to any measures for opening up the Ruhr, the hostility to the British policy of leaving the decision as to the future ownership of the mines to the German Government, the Blum Plan for the internationalisation of national ownership and control, were rooted in fear of the military power conferred by the Ruhr. It should be noted that the new plan has gained the support of all sections except the extreme Right and the extreme Left. By this one step the restoration of Germany to equality and partnership, her absorption in the Council of Europe and even eventually the use of German manpower in connection with Western European defence would become not only possible but inevitable.

4. Finally, the move is calculated to draw Western Germany and eventually all Germany decisively towards the West, thus marking for France a significant and seemingly irrevocable break with the classic policy of using Russia to contain Germany. After this, it is difficult to see how a Franco-Soviet alliance could again become a reality. Having regard not only to the strength of the Communist vote but also to the appeasing tendencies of small but influential groups here, such a decisive, if not provocatively, anti-Russian move is little short of astonishing.

5. By choosing the shock tactics he did to make known the plan. M. Schuman moreover has ensured that it could not be strangled at birth, but caught the imagination of public opinion, especially of the Germans and the Americans. Had the plan been submitted first as a document on the official level for study by the various working parties which have been engaged in combing the agenda for the Three-Power Conference, there would have been grave risk of its being riddled in detail, smothered with reservations and never presented at all as the clear-cut imaginative appeal which it is intended to have. Thus, as seen from here, France has taken a lead in Europe; she will claim to have given proof of statesmanship and to have belied her critics; she is no longer negative and destructive but positive and imaginative.

6. The Schuman Plan, like the Byrnes Plan and the Marshall Plan, represents a turning-point in European and, indeed, in world affairs. Had the Byrnes Plan been accepted by the Soviet Government, it is generally assumed, I suppose, that the division of Germany and of Europe in consequence need not have happened. It was rejected and from that moment, in fact, the uneasy Four-Power partnership of the war was ended. The tremendous possibilities of the Marshall Plan, on the other hand, were at once perceived by His Majesty's Government who seized upon it and made of it the instrument of European recovery. If, as I believe, the Schuman Plan represents another opportunity of equal significance, its acceptance or rejection can only

leave the situation a great deal better or a great deal worse. Whichever happens, it can never be the same again. If the plan is adopted in its main lines, Franco-German relations and in consequence Western European co-operation, the policy of Western Union and the Atlantic Pact should be set on a steady and hopeful course. If the plan is rejected, it will certainly shake the French Government and M. Schuman personally, but, further than this, I believe that it would have a paralysing effect on French statesmanship for years to come. It would seem inconceivable to French opinion that so bold a policy, involving for France both forgiveness of the past and pooling of resources for the future, could be rejected for disinterested motives. It would strengthen anew those negative and insular tendencies of French policy fostered by that corrosive school of thought, to which attention has been drawn in dispatches from here and against which M. Schuman himself has now warned us, the neutrality school. A very powerful argument would be afforded to those, not only Communists, who favour appeasement of the Soviet Government.

7. In short, France has placed the West before a decision which far transcends the immediate economic issues it raises. If we can encourage her and help her to go forward, whilst naturally seeking such adjustments as may reasonably be asked to meet the uncertainties and risks the plan may hold for us, we shall open the way, I believe, to a period of fruitful action for Western Europe and the Atlantic Council. If we allow the plan to be bogged down by technical reservations, we risk bringing about paralysis in Europe and so too in Atlantic affairs, from which it will be difficult, if not impossible, to shake the French again.

8. I have sent copies of this dispatch to His Majesty's Ambassador at Washington, to the United Kingdom High Commissioner at Wahnerheide and to the United Kingdom Permanent Delegate to O.E.E.C.

I have, &c.

OLIVER HARVEY.