

Record of a conversation with Ernest Bevin on the Schuman Plan (London, 2 June 1950)

Caption: On 2 June 1950, the British Foreign Secretary, Ernest Bevin, hospitalised in the London Clinic, considers with his close colleagues the possibility of the United Kingdom's non-participation in the negotiations on the implementation of the Schuman Plan.

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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Publication date: 20/10/2012

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The Lord President and the Minister of State called on the Secretary of State this morning to discuss the latest developments concerned with the French coal and steel plan.

They explained to the Secretary of State that the French Government had turned down the British amendments to their original communiqué, and had put forward an alternative draft which no longer stated that the participants in the conference had decided to set up a European authority whose decisions would be binding on Governments, but to set up such an authority was their aim in attending the conference. They also explained that M. Schuman had produced a memorandum stating that it was essential that the participants in the conference should have a "unity of view" and that if H.M. Government were unable to accept this by 8 p.m. this evening, negotiations would open without the U.K.

It was further explained that, although the U.K. would not be legally committed under the new formula, the word "aim" represented the basic idea of the whole scheme, namely the creation of a European organisation by means of which German industry could be controlled, and that if H.M. Government did not subscribe to this idea it was important to make it clear without delay.

A further difficulty lay in the fact that the French communiqué contemplated the drawing up of a treaty, and that it was felt that at the conference the main effort would be directed to this end and that the operational details of the French scheme would not be examined in any detail. The result of this would be that H.M. Government would be faced with a request to sign a treaty without knowing what the implications of it would be.

The Secretary of State agreed that the proper way to handle this question would have been to establish a commission which would first have made recommendations to interested Governments as to whether a scheme such as the present one was desirable. In the absence of a concrete French proposal, it was impossible to estimate its implications on our programmes of economic development or on our defence programmes. The Cabinet had not had a chance to consider the scheme, and until it did so the Government could not even commit itself to the principle of pooling the coal and steel industries of Great Britain with those of other European countries. Nevertheless, he was anxious that the French plan should not fall by the wayside, and he believed that H.M. Government must do everything in their power to see that the scheme was eventually successful. But H.M. Government could not accept the latest French suggestion, which was in the form of an ultimatum, since to do so would be to invite a repetition of this technique.

Since the French Government were incapable either of explaining the implications of their proposal or of satisfactorily answering questions of substance or procedure which it gave rise to, he proposed the following course of action, to which the Lord President and the minister of State agreed.

(1) To inform the French Ambassador :

(a) that H.M. Government could not accept the French draft by 8 p.m. since they were still not in possession of any concrete proposal and were consequently unable to estimate the possible effects on their programmes for economic development and defence.

(b) that the French Government must understand that H.M. Government were acting in good faith in this matter. They were anxious to do their best to see whether a workable scheme could be produced that was fair and just to all concerned and which would promote peace, European solidarity and economic and social progress.

(c) that H.M. Government felt the way to achieve this was not by exchanging notes which in the present case had led to misunderstanding and delay but by a meeting of Ministers of the countries interested at which the

question of procedure would be examined and settled.

(d) that when the method of operation of the scheme had been worked out in a way which would permit Governments to see its full implications a treaty to which Governments could adhere should be worked out.

(2) H.M. Ambassador in Paris should be instructed when putting these proposals to Monsieur Schuman that if the French Government felt they were unable to accept the proposals of H.M. Government they should proceed without them.

(3) in the event of the French Government rejecting the proposals a statement should be published explaining in detail the attitude of H.M. Government in the matter.

FOREIGN OFFICE, S.N.1.

2nd June, 1950