

Note from the British Embassy in Paris on French views on the Council of Europe (15 February 1950)

Caption: On 15 February 1950, the British Embassy in Paris drafts a note emphasising the lack of interest among politicians and the general public in France with regard to the Council of Europe.

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

<http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/>, Records created and inherited by the Foreign Office, FO. Report of French lack of interest in the Council of Europe since the last meeting of the Committee of Ministers, FO 371/88653.

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http://www.cvce.eu/obj/note_from_the_british_embassy_in_paris_on_french_views_on_the_council_of_europe_15_february_1950-en-9728bfe1-ccc2-4c61-8414-197526630104.html

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CONFIDENTIAL

British Embassy

Paris. 15th February 1950

N°115.

Sir,

During the sessions of the Council of Europe, both of the Assembly in the summer and the Committee of Ministers in the autumn, when there was naturally considerable public interest in all its activities, reports were sent from this post describing the attitude of French public men and of the French people in general towards the Council. In particular these questions were studied in despatches Nos. 442 and 580 of 22nd July and 22nd September 1949 and in telegram No. 238 Saving of 14th October 1949. The general impression was that the public was taking a real interest in the meetings of the Assembly and to a lesser extent in those of the Committee of Ministers, while the question of the admission of Germany aroused considerable interest. We are now in a slack period as regards the major activities of the Council and it may be of interest to examine afresh the attitude of French politicians and the public at a time when there is little to arouse their interest and therefore their attitude may be studied without the interference of any publicity stimuli. This brief review may also be of use as background for the meeting of the Committee of Ministers next month.

2. It has been emphasized many times that the curse of French political life is the apathy which is widespread among the great mass of the people. It is disappointing that enthusiasm for the Council of Europe, which was so manifest last summer, has declined as the large and resounding meetings recede in time. Even apart from the question of apathy, however, it is not altogether unnatural that interest should decline, not only because of the lack of events on which to centre publicity, but also since problems which are of more immediate interest to Frenchmen than those of the Council of Europe have become steadily more pressing over the last six months. The politically minded minority in the country are naturally preoccupied with internal affairs where the whole future of the constitution seems in the balance. The cost of living and wages policy come even closer to the man in the street. It is always possible to maintain a certain interest in Germany and to some extent the Middle East, but other international questions depend upon events to sustain their news value for public opinion as a whole.

3. Even Minister's have recently given little of their attention to the Council of Europe. The official at the Quai d'Orsay who deals with the subject has remarked to members of my staff on various occasions that he is unable to obtain decisions on questions which he submits. At the same time, however, members of Parliament who are taking an active part in the periodic committees of the Council of Europe retain their keenness. As is perhaps to be expected, they do not realise that their activities seem to outsiders to be divorced from the real and pressing problems of the moment. In this connection, the attitude of the French representatives at the O.E.E.C. which are mentioned later in this despatch form an interesting commentary.

4. Among the officials who are concerned with the formation of French policy towards the Council of Europe there is some concern at the lack of life and concerted purpose in the Council. They have given much thought to means of remedying the clash of interest between the Committee of Ministers and the Assembly and of preventing the Assembly and its committees from wasting their time on vain and impractical projects. Their favoured scheme so far appears to be a system of official committees on the lines of those set up in the Brussels Treaty organisation. These committees would give detailed study to questions referred to them by the Committee of Ministers on the proposals of the Assembly and would find means of translating general ideas into definite plans and of making them compatible with governmental action.

5. Official opinion is less than enthusiastic on the idea of a European "executive" as proposed by M. Guy Mollet, and adopted I understand with modifications by M. Paris, the Secretary General. It is thought that some such body might be made to work if it contained, besides representatives of the Assembly, a member of the Committee of Ministers, for preference the Chairman. The duties which they apparently foresee for such a body would be to keep official committees on Brussels Treaty lines properly briefed and co-ordinated and to ensure that questions referred to outside bodies were not merely ignored. In other words, it would be an organisation to follow up the decisions of the Committee of Ministers and the resolutions of the Assembly rather than a true Executive. There seems to be a good deal of muddled thinking on these various proposals, but the important thing is that the Quai d'Orsay at least are trying to evolve a plan which will set the Council as a whole on a more workmanlike basis. No decision has yet been taken as to the policy which the French representative at the next Committee of Ministers will follow on this or other subjects.