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The Schuman Plan and the British Abdication of Leadership in Europe

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Edmund Dell has moved from his highly praised account of the early years of the Callaghan administration, which he observed and in which he participated as a government minister, to the last years of the Attlee administration. In particular his attention is focused on the failure of the then Labour government to accept the challenge to participate in the plan for a European Coal and Steel Community (ECSC) launched by the French foreign minister, Robert Schuman, in May 1950. He is convinced that the United Kingdom could, and should, have embraced the initiative and won itself a central position in the future construction of Europe. The penalty of the failure to do so has reverberated through British influence in Europe ever since.

The core of the book (p 110 onwards) is a detailed reconstruction of the British reaction to the Schuman Plan. It combines the classics of British historiography on post-war Europe relating to the topic with a thorough examination of the archival mater ials relating to the period. The archival base, in its turn, rests heavily upon the official collection of Documents on British Policy Overseas on the topic (published by HMSO in 1986) which traces policy-making from cabinet level downwards from May 1950 onwards. Assembled under the leadership of the late Roger Bullen, this excellent collection really cover a lot of ground and leaves little to be uncovered in the files released in the Public Record Office (and aside from a dabble in the Foreign Office and some more extensive culling from ten or so Treasury files for 1950-51, Dell also leaves the PRO alone). The material that is new, certainly in the context of writing on the Schuman Plan, are the diaries and archives of:

- the prime minister, Clement Attlee,
- the ex-Chancellor of the Exchequer and Chairman of the Labour Party's International Committee, Hugh Dalton,
- the parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Foreign Office, Ernest Davies,
- the Minister of State at the Foreign Office, Kenneth Younger.

The last of these, especially, provides a treasure trove of insights and judgements that grace the analysis. From the moment of Schuman's radio announcement on 9 May 1950, and the immediate frenzy of self-righteous indignation worked up in Whitehall at th e lack of prior consultation, Dell's account of subsequent

British policy is unparalleled in the detail of its treatment and the texture of its analysis. Told with insight, confidence and verve, and permeated by a conviction that the decisions taken at th e time were both unnecessary and wrong, Dell takes the reader through a detailed reconstruction of British policy-making on the vital issue of European integration.

At the time of Schuman's announcement, both Ernest Bevin, the British foreign secretary, and Stafford Cripps, the Chancellor of the Exchequer, were ill. Bevin was just out of hospital and was almost dysfunctional whilst Cripps' incisiveness and judgeme nt were seriously impaired. Without their leadership, the civil servants held undue sway... and they were so condescendingly arrogant as almost to defy belief. Thus was created a climate in which it became easy to be scornful of the French initiative, to take their commitment to their ideas as a sign of their inflexibility, and to come to a position that it would all collapse anyway. Repeated approaches by Monnet and Schuman were treated with a total lack of urgency and so it was hardly surprising that th e negotiations should have commenced without a British representative. The government's measured position was that whilst it could not join the negotiations, it could reconsider when it saw the results. All this time the Labour party (as distinct from the Labour government) had been preparing its position on Europe. Entitled "European Unity" and released before the government White Paper on the Schuman Plan, the report represented a rebuttal of British participation in any continental experiment and was q uite clearly at odds with the position adopted by the government. It was not surprising that many observers at the time took it as the sub-text of the governments true thinking on the matter.

All of this is narrated with great insight and recounted with zest. Less successful, however, is the first one hundred pages which, by way of providing the necessary context, sketches the developments between the end of the War and the announcement of the Schuman Plan. Its basic problem is that it packs too much into too little space. Moreover, it continuously switches in intensity and depth of analysis without making clear why the choice of topic and why the change of focus. A reader new to the subjec t will be bewildered by the rapid shifts between countries, statesmen, institutions and issues.

A more fundamental shortcoming in these introductory pages is the absence of any real analysis of the coal and steel industry. There is a respectable body of recent historical writing that approaches the Schuman Plan from the starting point of the coal and steel industries rather than from the institutional architecture designed to contain them. These point to the postwar plans for expansion of the industries while Germany's capacity was held down by the Allies, and the impact on the supply of final st eel (and the intra-trade in coal and iron ore) once the shackles holding Germany were broken. They argue that the purpose of the plan was to control the freedom of German industrialists, if necessary by lining up their own domestic industrialists alongsid e them. None of these considerations appear in the text and the reader has no way of judging the potential impact of the re-emergence of German competition on the industry elsewhere or the likely effects Schuman Plan on their industries. By the same token , the reader cannot judge why the British industries were seemingly insensitive to a problem conceived as urgent on the Continent or apparently immune to the effects of being locked outside the trade-bloc envisaged by the Coal and Steel Community. It is i mportant to be aware, therefore, that Dell's history of the Schuman Plan is institutional and that it ignores the more functionalist approaches to the subject.

Let us leave the quibbles about the context and return to the main arguments of the text. Dell contends that:

i) the Schuman plan could, and should, have been anticipated,
ii) domestic political circumstances did not rule out membership,
iii) membership was compatible with Britain's global and Commonwealth role,
iv) the refusal to participate in the scheme derived more from pique than from a consideration of the national interest,
v) the UK, through participation, could have shaped the outcome to contain its interests,
vi) to this end, it would have won support from other participating nations, and even from within the French government which equally failed to share "Monnet's federalism" (p 289),
vii) officials should have realised that the scheme had real chances for success rather than rely on its failure,

viii) policy-making was unduly dependent upon officials rather than being made by ministers,
ix) the refusal to join the ECSC "entrenched Franco-German leadership in Europe" in a way that the UK, even today, "has never been able to penetrate" (p 300).

He suggests that these conclusions are against "the conventional wisdom" (p vii), although, given the swathes of recent contributions by historians to this subject that fail to appear in either the text or in the subsequent bibliography, one could ques tion whether they are as novel as is claimed. Certainly this reviewer recognises the description of sub-optimal policy-making from his own research into this question and on British reaction to subsequent European initiatives. The glib, smug, self-assured tone of the officials that one finds throughout the records stored at the PRO resonates through Dell's account of the British rejection of Schuman's initiative. In fairness, it must be said that the very openness of British policy archives allows subsequ ent historians to pass this kind of judgement. The American archives, which are also fairly open, give equally startling insights into a gung-ho, macho approach to policy analysis. In both cases, we may be exaggerating the importance of 'house-style' in f raming memoranda and comments for policy substance.

Much of Dell's analysis relies on the fact that the British were shocked and unprepared for the Schuman Plan and that in the subsequent confusion alternative policy opportunities were missed. If he is wrong in this, then much of the significance attach ed to the way in which the Schuman announcement was (mis-) handled is lost and his alternative scenario becomes less plausible. I would argue that he is wrong. The British government took its essential decision on European integration in January 1949 and reconfirmed it in October. Dell comes close to these decisions, one time (p70) by citing an archive fragment from the collection by the Treasury official 'Otto' Clarke (an exchange between officials) and the second time (p73) through Milward's work on the Reconstruction of Western Europe. Neither source seemed to have prompted him to dig deeper. In January 1949 the cabinet Economic Policy Committee endorsed a note presented by Bevin and Stafford Cripps in which they argued (inter-alia) that Britain's abil ity to fight another war should not be impeded by damage to its economic structure through undue dependence on Europe. This decision was reconfirmed in October 1949 and was incorporated into the speech given by Stafford Cripps in reply the appeal of Paul Hoffman (head of the ECA) for closer "integration" in Europe (a term used sixteen times, not 31 as Dell, citing Milward, suggests). Stafford Cripps' reply anticipated the 'three circles' logic adopted by Churchill several years later. Britain , it argued, was part of a trans-Atlantic, a Commonwealth and a European world. It could undertake no commitment that would prejudice its other responsibilities. The speech, incidentally, was still being cited as government policy when the British, in 1955, withdrew from the talks that would lead the 'Six' to form the EEC.

Thus the British had a policy to cover the eventuality of a proposal for closer European integration. It is true that they were unprepared for Schuman's announcement and were furious with it (as they considered that such issues concerning Germany were the preserve of the tripartite occupying powers) but the decision had already been taken. In this light, much of what Dell describes is not a botched effort at policy-making but a botched effort at finding the right tactics. Against this backdrop, Staffor d Cripps' wobble in a conversation with Monnet (p. 126-128) was more probably a misplaced effort to let his guest down lightly than a glimpse at a change of heart. Moreover, the fact that what was at stake was tactics rather than policy, would also explai n why there was so little intervention by cabinet members and so little high-level dialogue with the French.

I would now like to raise one other point in Dell's argument. He suggests that Britain, had it participated in the negotiations, could have shaped the outcome in its own interests and that this would have attracted the support of the other participants , who were closer to the UK's position than to Monnet's "federalist ideas". It is true that the long negotiations changed Monnet's original proposals out of all recognition and it is also true that within each government there were opponents to Monnet's ' federalism'. My worries are two-fold. First, Dell does not fully consider the control functions offered by the treaty over Germany's freedom to adopt preferential practices towards its own industry (or discriminatory practices against its partners). It is doubtful whether any intergovernmental organisation could offer the same security. Second, Dell's sources are not the best reflection of the position in the partner states. To document these positions, Dell employs either memoir

accounts of those (in-) d irectly involved or quotes from the British archives. In the first case, Dell relies mostly on Massigli, who was ambassador in London at the time (and, self-delusion notwithstanding, ambassadors are not always privy to their government's thinking) and Mon net, whose memoirs were written by his staff as much as a political testament as a piece of objective history. In the second case, he employs observations from foreign office and treasury files but since Dell concedes that their authors misjudged the situ ation at the time, they hardly make for a trustworthy source forty years later. With the exception of one footnote, Dell ignores the source publication series The Foreign Relations of the United States and he ignores the growing body of literature about t he positions of France, Germany, Belgium, Luxembourg, the Netherlands and Italy based on the same meticulous study of their respective archives as Dell employs of the British archives for his study of the UK. One need not, and should not, have to second g uess national positions on the basis of sources of dubious reliability and one should not be fobbed off with an archive reference to the PRO for information that is already in the public domain.

To sum up, this is a good and useful book once it gets onto its own terrain. In fairness, my point of disagreement on whether we are seeing policy or tactics in the making has not been raised in the literature before and I have raised it here because t he medium specifically offers the opportunity for debate. My point on other country positions is partly one of methodology.... I know that, in this case, the text is not seriously distorted as a result. Again, I have referred to the issue here in the hope of sparking off a wider discussion. Finally, therefore, if I were to return to Dell's conclusions I would agree with conclusions ii, iii, v, vii, ix, disagree with i, iv, viii, and remain uncertain over vi.

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