European Commission

Johan Willem Beyen: a plan for a common market

Johan Willem Beyen 1897- 1976

The international banker, businessman and politician Johan Willem Beyen was a Dutch politician who, with his 'Beyen Plan', breathed new life into the process of European integration in the mid-1950s.

Beyen is one of the lesser-known members of the group of Founding Fathers of the EU. Amongst the people who knew him he was admired for his charm, international orientation and social ease.

In the Netherlands, as Minister of Foreign Affairs, Beyen gave an important input to the European unification process. He was able to convince reluctant forces in the Netherlands, as well as in Europe, to accept European integration. His 'Beyen Plan' was a proposal for a customs union and far-reaching economic cooperation within a common European market. The essence of this was actually decided in the Rome Treaties in 1957 and has been at the core of the European Union ever since.

Early life

Johan Willem (Wim) Beyen was born on 2 May 1897 in Utrecht in the Netherlands. As the son of a wealthy family he had a carefree childhood, enjoying an international upbringing with a focus on literature and music. He began his career in national and international finance after graduating in law at the University of Utrecht in 1918. His first post was at the Dutch Ministry of Finance, but in 1924 he moved into the corporate and banking world. He eventually became President of the Bank for International Settlements and Director of the British–Dutch consumer goods company Unilever.

Second World War

During the Second World War Beyen worked in exile in London, while his home country was occupied by Nazi Germany. In 1944 he played an important role at the Bretton Woods Conference where foundations were laid for a post-war international financial structure. From 1946 he represented the Netherlands on the board of the World Bank and from 1948 played the same role at the International Monetary Fund.

Minister of Foreign Affairs

Beyen was Dutch Minister of Foreign Affairs during the years of reconstruction following the Second World War. During the war Beyen had become convinced that full regional economic cooperation was necessary to prevent a recurrence of the kind of financial crisis seen in the 1930s. Leaders throughout post-war Europe started to realise that the horrors of war and economic crises could only be overcome by international cooperation.

Whilst some initiatives focused on pursuing this cooperation on a global scale, Beyen believed that more could be achieved by regional cooperation. The first steps towards economic cooperation were taken in 1948 with the Marshall Plan – the huge American aid package to Europe which required the European countries to coordinate economic matters in the OECD. Following the Schuman Declaration of 9 May 1950, the European Coal and Steel Community was created in 1952 with the aim of ultimately making wars in Europe impossible.

Beyen at the Messina Conference, where he introduced his plan for economic cooperation in Europe.

The Beyen Plan

Beyen however saw the possibility of even greater cooperation between European nations. He realised that political integration at that time would have been hard to achieve and managed to persuade his national and international colleagues that further progress could be made with further economic cooperation, believing that political unification would follow. With this in mind, he drew up the Beyen Plan. With his experience in international finance and banking he knew that issues like trade barriers and unemployment were not easily resolved at national level and required a more international approach. Even though there was reluctance and even some downright opposition within the Dutch government, he managed to put the plan forward both during the negotiations on the European Defence Community and the discussions on the European Political Community in the early 1950s.

A common market

He initially received little support, especially as the French government at the time was not interested in further economic integration. However, when the planned European Defence Community failed because the French parliament decided not to ratify the treaty, this changed. As there was to be neither the planned defence community nor a political community, an impasse arose. This brought the Beyen plan back into the limelight. The plan revolved around the concept that full economic cooperation was necessary, not just in the field of coal and steel but as a whole. The solution was therefore a common market for everything, along the lines of the cooperation between Belgium, the Netherlands and Luxembourg created in the 'Benelux' agreement in 1944. The Benelux countries, under the guidance of Belgian Minister Paul-Henri Spaak, coupled Beyen's ideas to a French plan for a Community for Atomic Energy and provided Beyen with the opportunity to outline his plans during the Messina Conference in 1955. He explained that political unity was not conceivable without a common market with some common responsibility for economic and social policy and a supranational authority. This resonated with the opinions of the other Conference participants. It led to six countries signing the Treaties of Rome in March 1957 and creating the European Economic Community and Euratom.

Beyen's role has often been overlooked in later years, but his work contributed to the European integration process in the 1950s and earns him a place amongst the prominent figures we now call the Founding Fathers of the European Union. He will long be remembered as the individual who gave fresh impetus to the European project when it was most needed.