Already with regard to the very early period discussed here, the inactivity implied by the term ‘missed opportunity’ conceals an important shift in British policy towards Continental European integration – from accepting an invitation to join the six future EEC members in their preparatory deliberations in July 1955, to an unsuccessful attempt in November to persuade the German government to abandon the project. In this sense, British policy towards the relance of Europe was very much an active one, and it is the evolution of official thinking after the Messina conference which is of interest to this first chapter. Given the futility of the diplomatic initiative of November 1955, it will be asked how accurately the British government had assessed the German position. In order to answer this question, the chapter will commence with an examination of Bonn’s integration policy prior to the Messina conference.

Bonn and the Messina conference

The renewal of the debate about European integration after the EDC débâcle did not start with the Benelux initiative discussed at the Messina conference in June 1955. In the spring of the same year, ideas about further economic integration had already surfaced, as, for example, an extension of the competences of the High Authority of the ECSC suggested by its outgoing President, Jean Monnet. It is important to trace the post-Messina debate back to this earlier period, for the German Cabinet’s conceptual divisions about the Common Market intensified in response to Monnet’s proposals.
He had envisaged High Authority competences to be extended to cover transport, the electricity generating industries and the development of atomic energy for peaceful purposes.

It was against these proposals that the Minister of Economics, Ludwig Erhard, not only publicly but also in private correspondence with the Chancellor, Konrad Adenauer, expressed his strong opposition.\(^3\) He argued that further extensions of sectoral supranational control made little economic sense, since they would lead to a fragmentation of national economies, to a readjustment of the rate of growth to that of the slowest member of the proposed Community, and to an economic division of the Western world. Powerful interest groups shared his dislike of the extension of the ECSC principle, in particular the electricity generating industries, which warned that increased energy costs would translate into disadvantages for German industry at large.\(^4\) While Erhard's criticism of the proposals was therefore born out of a liberal free-market philosophy resulting in a strong dislike of regulated markets and supranational authorities, he nevertheless conceded that there was a political imperative to advance the cohesion of the Western Alliance. To this end, however, he suggested co-operation of national governments in the fields of trade liberalization and currency policy with the ultimate aim of worldwide convertibility, a theme which was recurring in his public speeches at home and abroad, in which he praised the work already done within intergovernmental organizations such as the OEEC and the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT).\(^5\)

The State Secretary in the Auswärtiges Amt, Walter Hallstein, replied on behalf of the Chancellor.\(^6\) In his letter to Erhard, he described the differences as being merely of modalities and claimed that there was agreement in principle on the question of European integration. Rejecting sectoral integration in general, he welcomed Monnet's ideas on transport and nuclear energy, claiming that these sectors were well suited to this approach. More importantly, he was outspoken in his preference for supranational institutions as a means to foster political integration in the Community. The need for such a step lay in the international situation which he described in a much more dramatic tone than Erhard had done. The achievements of intergovernmental organizations in the field of integration were, in his view, far from praiseworthy, and it is interesting to note the undisguised opposition of Hallstein to British participation, which he regarded as an obstacle to integration in these organizations.