

Address given by Winston Churchill at the Congress of Europe in The Hague (7 May 1948)

Caption: On 7 May 1948, at the opening session of the Congress of Europe in The Hague, Winston Churchill, former British Prime Minister and Honorary President of the Congress, delivers an address from the platform in the Ridderzaal (Knights' Hall) at the Binnenhof, home to the Netherlands' Parliament, in which he warns of the threat which the Soviet Union represents for the future of European unification.

Source: Council of Europe = Conseil de l'Europe. Congress of Europe = Congrès de l'Europe, The Hague, 7-11 May 1948 = La Haye, 7-11 mai 1948. Strasbourg: Council of Europe = Conseil de l'Europe, April 1999 = avril 1999. 453 p. ISBN 92-871-3918-0. p. 7-11.

Copyright: (c) Council of Europe

URL:

http://www.cvce.eu/obj/address_given_by_winston_churchill_at_the_congress_of_europe_in_the_hague_7_may_1948-en-58118da1-af22-48c0-bc88-93cda974f42c.html

Publication date: 02/12/2013

Address given by Winston Churchill (The Hague, 7 May 1948)

Let me first extend a warm welcome to all who have come together here, and wish them a fruitful result of their labours and discussions.

Since I spoke on this subject at Zurich in 1946, and since our British United Europe Movement was launched in January 1947, events have carried our affairs beyond our expectations. This cause was obviously either vital or merely academic. If it was academic, it would wither by the wayside; but if it was the vital need of Europe and the world in this dark hour, then the spark would start a fire which would glow brighter and stronger in the hearts and the minds of men and women in many lands. This is what has actually happened.

Great governments have banded themselves together with all their executive power. The mighty republic of the United States has espoused the Marshall Plan. Sixteen European States are now associated for economic purposes; five have entered into close economic and military relationship. We hope that this nucleus will in due course be joined by the peoples of Scandinavia, and of the Iberian peninsula, as well as by Italy, who should now resume her full place in the comity of nations. All who have worked and tried their best and especially Ministers in responsible office – we must not forget what their difficulties are – like Mr. Bevin, M. Bidault, M. Spaak, and General Marshall and others, have a right to feel content with the progress made and proud of what they have done. This is not a Movement of parties but a movement of peoples. There is no room for jealousies. If there is rivalry of parties, let it be to see which one will distinguish itself the most for the common cause. No one can suppose that Europe can be united on any party or sectional basis, any more than any one nation can assert an overweening predominance. It must be all for all. Europe can only be united by the heart-felt wish and vehement expression of the great majority of all the peoples in all the parties in all the freedom-loving countries, no matter where they dwell or how they vote.

We need not waste our time in disputes about who originated this idea of United Europe. There are many valid modern patents. There are many famous names associated with the revival and presentation of this idea, but we may all, I think, yield our pretensions to Henry Navarre, King of France, who, with his great Minister Sully, between the years 1600 and 1607, laboured to set up a permanent committee representing the fifteen – now we are sixteen – leading Christian States of Europe. This body was to act as an arbitrator on all questions concerning religious conflict, national frontiers, internal disturbance, and common action against any danger from the East, which in those days meant the Turks. This he called "The Grand Design." After this long passage of time we are the servants of the Grand Design.

This Congress has brought together leaders of thought and action from all the free countries of Europe. Statesmen of all political parties, leading figures from all the Churches, eminent writers, leaders of the professions, lawyers, chiefs of industry and prominent trade-unionists are gathered here. In fact a representative grouping of the most essential elements in the political, industrial, cultural and spiritual life of Europe is now assembled in this ancient hall. And although everyone has been invited in his individual capacity, nevertheless this Congress, and any conclusions it may reach, may fairly claim to be the voice of Europe. It is time indeed that that voice should be raised upon the scene of chaos and prostration, caused by the wrongs and hatreds of the past, and amid the dangers which lie about us in the present and cloud the future. We shall only save ourselves from the perils which draw near by forgetting the hatreds of the past, by letting national rancours and revenges die, by progressively effacing frontiers and barriers which aggravate and congeal our divisions, and by rejoicing together in that glorious treasure of literature, of romance, of ethics, of thought and toleration belonging to all, which is the true inheritance of Europe, the expression of its genius and honour, but which by our quarrels, our follies, by our fearful wars and the cruel and awful deeds that spring from war and tyrants, we have almost cast away.

It is indeed fitting that this first Congress of Europe should meet in Holland, which, with her neighbours of the Benelux group, is already leading the way by her example, and for whose hospitality and countenance we express our gratitude. And may I here say with what especial significance and warmth we greet the presence here of Princess Juliana and Prince Bernhardt who have so graciously come to join us in our opening session. Indeed Benelux, that happy novel term, is at once a model and a pioneer for our immediate

advance.

The Movement for European Unity must be a positive force, deriving its strength from our sense of common spiritual values. It is a dynamic expression of democratic faith based upon moral conceptions and inspired by a sense of mission. In the centre of our movement stands the idea of a Charter of Human Rights, guarded by freedom and sustained by law. It is impossible to separate economics and defence from the general political structure. Mutual aid in the economic field and joint military defence must inevitably be accompanied step by step with a parallel policy of closer political unity.

It is said with truth that this involves some sacrifice or merger of national sovereignty. But it is also possible and not less agreeable to regard it as the gradual assumption by all the nations concerned of that larger sovereignty which can alone protect their diverse and distinctive customs and characteristics and their national traditions all of which under totalitarian systems, whether Nazi, Fascist, or Communist, would certainly be blotted out for ever.

Some time ago I stated that it was the proud mission of the victor nations to take the Germans by the hand and lead them back into the European family, and I rejoice that some of the most eminent and powerful Frenchmen have spoken in this sense. To rebuild Europe from its ruins and make its light shine forth again upon the world, we must first of all conquer ourselves. It is in this way only that the sublime, with its marvellous transmutations of material things, can be brought into our daily life.

Europe requires all that Frenchmen, all that Germans, and all that every one of us can give. I therefore welcome here the German delegation, whom we have invited into our midst. For us the German problem is to restore the economic life of Germany and revive the ancient fame of the German race without thereby exposing their neighbours and ourselves to any rebuilding or reassertion of their military power of which we still bear the scars. United Europe provides the only solution to this two-sided problem and it is also a solution which can be implemented without delay.

(Applause).

It is necessary for the executive governments of the sixteen countries, associated for the purposes of the Marshall Plan, to make precise arrangements. These can apply at present only to what is called Western Europe. In this we wish them well and will give them all loyal support; but our aim here is not confined to Western Europe. We seek nothing less than all Europe. Distinguished exiles from Czechoslovakia, and almost all the Eastern European nations, and also from Spain, are present among us. We aim at the eventual participation of all European peoples whose society and way of life, making all allowances for the different points of view in various countries, are not in disaccord with a Charter of Human Rights and with the sincere expression of free democracy. We welcome any country where the people own the Government, and not the Government the people.

(Applause).

It is not the fault of those who are gathered here today, nor of the Governments involved in the Marshall Plan or in the Western Union, and least of all is it the fault of the United States, that the unity of Europe cannot be at present complete. All the States of the East and South-East of Europe, except Greece, are constrained to hold aloof from us and most of them are not allowed to express themselves by free democratic electoral processes. We must aim at nothing less than the union of Europe as a whole, and we look forward with confidence to the day when that union will be achieved.

I was anxious at first lest the United States of America should view with hostility the idea of a United States of Europe. But I rejoice that the great Republic in its era of world-leadership has risen far above such moods. We must all be thankful as we sit here that the nation called to the summit of the world by its mass, its energies and its power, has not been found lacking in those qualities of greatness and nobility upon which the record of famous States depends. Far from resenting the creation of United Europe, the American people welcome and ardently sustain the resurrection of what was called the Old World, now found in full

partnership with the New.

(Applause).

Nothing that we do or plan here conflicts with the paramount authority of a world organisation of the United Nations. On the contrary I have always believed, as I declared in the war, that a Council of Europe was a subordinate but necessary part of the world organisation. I thought at that time, when I had great responsibility, that there should be several regional councils, august but subordinate, that these should form the massive pillars upon which the world organisation would be founded in majesty and calm. This was the direction in which my hopes and thought lay three or four years ago. To take an example from the military sphere, with which our hard experiences have made us all familiar, the design for world government might have followed the system of three or more groups of armies – in this case armies of peace – under one supreme headquarters. Thus I saw the vast Soviet Union forming one of these groups. The Council of Europe, including Great Britain linked with her Empire and Commonwealth, would be another. Thirdly, there was the United States and her sister republics in the Western Hemisphere with all their great spheres of interest and influence. In the mind picture which it was possible to form as victory in the war became certain, there was the hope that each of these three splendid groupings of states and nations whose affairs of course would sometimes overlap, might have settled within themselves a great number of differences and difficulties, which are now dragged up to the supreme world organisation, and that far fewer, but also far more potent figures would represent them at the summit. There was also the hope that they would meet not in an overcrowded Tower of Babel, but, as it were, upon a mountain top where all was cool and quiet and calm, and from which the wide vision of the world would be presented with all things in their due proportion. As the poet Blake wrote:

"Above Time's troubled fountains
On the great Atlantic mountains
In my golden house on high".

To some extent events have moved in this direction, but not in the spirit or the shape that was needed. The western hemisphere already presents itself as a unit. Here at The Hague we are met to help our various Governments to create the new Europe. But we are all grieved and perplexed and imperilled by the discordant attitude and policy of the third great and equal partner, without whose active aid the world organisation cannot function, nor the shadow of war be lifted from the hearts and minds of men and nations. We must do our best to create and combine the great regional unities which it is in our power to influence, and we must endeavour by patient and faithful service, to prepare for the day when there will be an effective world government resting upon the main groupings of mankind. Thus for us and for all who share our civilisation and our desire for peace and world government, there is only one duty and watchword: Persevere. That is the command which should rule us at this Congress. Persevere along all the main lines that have been made clear and imprinted upon us by the bitter experiences through which we have passed. Persevere towards those objectives which are lighted for us by all the wisdom and inspiration of the past: Persevere.

(Applause).

I have the feeling that after the second Thirty Years' War, for that is what it is, through which we have just passed, mankind needs and seeks a period of rest. After all, how little it is that the millions of homes in Europe represented here today are asking. What is it that all these wage-earners, skilled artisans, soldiers and tillers of the soil require, deserve, and may be led to demand? Is it not a fair chance to make a home, to reap the fruits of their toil, to cherish their wives, to bring up their children in a decent manner and to dwell in peace and safety, without fear or bullying or monstrous burdens or exploitations, however this may be imposed upon them? That is their heart's desire. That is what we mean to win for them.

President Roosevelt spoke of the Four Freedoms, but the one that matters most today is Freedom from Fear. Why should all these hardworking families be harassed, first in bygone times, by dynastic and religious quarrels, next by nationalistic ambitions, and finally by ideological fanaticism? Why should they now have

to be regimented and hurled against each other by variously labelled forms of totalitarian tyranny, all fomented by wicked men, building their own predominance upon the misery and the subjugation of their fellow human beings? Why should so many millions of humble homes in Europe, aye, and much of its enlightenment and culture, sit quaking in dread of the policeman's knock?

That is the question we have to answer here. That is the question which perhaps we have the power to answer here. After all, Europe has only to arise and stand in her own majesty, faithfulness and virtue, to confront all forms of tyranny, ancient or modern, Nazi or Communist, with forces which are unconquerable, and which if asserted in good time may never be challenged again.

I take a proud view of this Congress. We cannot rest upon benevolent platitudes and generalities. Our powers may be limited but we know and we must affirm what we mean and what we want. On the other hand it would not be wise in this critical time to be drawn into laboured attempts to draw rigid structures of constitutions. That is a later stage, and it is one in which the leadership must be taken by the ruling governments in response no doubt to our impulse, and in many cases to their own conceptions. We are here to lay the foundations upon which the statesmen of the western democracies may stand, and to create an atmosphere favourable to the decisions to which they may be led. It is not for us who do not wield the authority of Governments to confront each other or the world with sharply-cut formulas or detailed arrangements. There are many different points of view which have to find their focus. We in Britain must move in harmony with our great partners in the Commonwealth, who, I do not doubt, though separated from us by the ocean spaces, share our aspirations and follow with deep attention our trend of thought. But undue precipitancy, like too much refinement, would hinder and not help the immediate mission we have to fulfil. Nevertheless we must not separate without a positive step forward.

The task before us at this Congress is not only to raise the voice of United Europe during these few days we are together. We must here and now resolve that in one form or another a European Assembly shall be constituted which will enable that voice to make itself continuously heard and we trust with ever-growing acceptance through all the free countries of this Continent.

A high and a solemn responsibility rests upon us here this afternoon in this Congress of a Europe striving to be reborn. If we allow ourselves to be rent and disordered by pettiness and small disputes, if we fail in clarity of view or courage in action, a priceless occasion may be cast away for ever. But if we all pull together and pool the luck and the comradeship – and we shall need all the comradeship and not a little luck if we are to move together in this way – and firmly grasp the larger hopes of humanity, then it may be that we shall move into a happier sunlit age, when all the little children who are now growing up in this tormented world may find themselves not the victors nor the vanquished in the fleeting triumphs of one country over another in the bloody turmoil of destructive war, but the heirs of all the treasures of the past and the masters of all the science, the abundance and the glories of the future.

(Applause).