

Address given by Joseph Bech (The Hague, 3 February 1958)

Caption: On 3 February 1958, the Treaty instituting the Benelux Economic Union is signed in The Hague. There, Joseph Bech, Luxembourg Foreign Minister, pays tribute to those who took the initiative for this union before the end of the war.

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‘Your Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,

At first sight, one might think that today’s ceremony is somewhat paradoxical. Is it not true that we have always liked to point to Benelux as a model and a precursor of a wider European integration — and now it seems that we have been overtaken by events, and our people are asking us to explain the significance of this signature which follows the signature and entry into force of the major European Treaties.

We owe them an answer, and I should like, before developing my reply any further, to sum up my thinking as follows: the European Treaties are, as yet, only a beginning, a summary of our hopes and expectations, whilst the Treaty of Union that we are signing today is, above all, the culmination and embodiment in law of our experiences.

Let us not forget that our Union has been — within certain limits — a reality for the last 10 years. In fact, it was at the beginning of 1948 that customs duties were finally abolished between our countries. Now, the authors of the European Treaties have copied us, and announced that the European Economic Community is also ‘founded on a customs union’. This larger union will, as you know, be complete only after 15 years, exactly a quarter of a century after we opened our own frontiers to each other.

Although our customs union was not the first of its kind, we can nevertheless say that Benelux is the first attempt to form a union in the modern economic world, characterised by the concentration of economic and social factors and their complete interdependence, as well as State intervention in the economy, established on the basis of programmes devised for the most varied sectors.

In this deeply renewed economic context, our Union has developed in an experimental manner, as each problem arising from the abolition of customs duties has been confronted. It has become clear — and this is another lesson that the European Community has learnt from us — that the opening of frontiers is not in itself enough to increase free trade and that a large number of problems and repercussions will follow, reaching far beyond the realm of free trade. Thus the decision of principle of the three Governments taken during the Second World War and the actual abolition of trade barriers at a later date has led inevitably to the customs union gradually developing into a complete economic union. I am sure that it is in this pragmatic way that momentum will be given to reach the fulfilment of the union on which we have embarked.

Today’s Treaty is the result of efforts made to extend the principles of freedom, unification and cooperation in all sectors of economic activity, beyond mere trade in goods and reaching into the social domain as well as intellectual activities. For sure, some temporary restrictions are still placed on the major principles of union, there are key areas where we have had to work out transitional phases and safeguards, even after such a long test period. But it must be said that, today, by signing this Treaty, we have achieved a significant result, well beyond what could have been expected 10 or 15 years ago.

It is hard to imagine the amount of effort and the negotiations needed during this initial period to secure an outcome whose relative simplicity bears no relation to the hard work involved. I am happy to see gathered here today, on this solemn occasion, all those involved in the creation of Benelux from the pioneers to the most recent newcomers. Please accept, on behalf of the Government of the Grand Duchy, our gratitude and sincere admiration.

At the same time, we must remember those who are no longer with us to celebrate the happy conclusion to this Union, those who contributed the very best of their talents.

May the outcome of so much goodwill signify at the same time a new beginning. May the consolidation of the Union, and our relations with one another, remind us that we must be united in facing the world around us, so that Benelux may be more than just a geographical area, more than just the collective name of three nations with close affinities. Let it be an indissoluble entity that may recognise and follow a common goal

and a shared destiny, beyond the individual interests of the three countries.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is not only on these special occasions, but every day, carrying out routine tasks, that people feel, measure and increase their respect for each other. At present, this idea of solidarity is reaching deeper and deeper into the population.

This has not always been the case.

I have witnessed this development, from the Belgo-Luxembourgish Economic Union, of which I was a signatory in 1921, through the signature of the Benelux Customs Convention in 1944 in London, up to the Treaty of Rome that signalled the beginning of the Common Market. At each stage, we had to defeat the bitter resistance of specific groups and national self-interest, sometimes quite justified. It should be a matter of pride for our three countries that we have opened the way to economic union in Europe. That will enable the Old Continent to take the place it deserves in the world through the efforts of its people, its science, its thought and culture.'