

Address by Paul-Henri Spaak (4 September 1954)

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Ladies and gentlemen,

Ten years ago, on 4 September 1944, I was in London on behalf of the Belgian Government to sign the Netherlands–Belgium–Luxembourg Customs Convention which, or at least so we hoped, was supposed to lead us towards full economic union between the three countries. What we wanted to do at the time was to tighten the political ties, which had shown themselves to be so intimate during the war, between our countries and create a common market of nearly 20 million people which would make us into a real economic power. I think I can say now that that bold experiment, which had the eyes of the world on it, has been a success, despite all the difficulties we have had to overcome. Three quarters of the economic union has now been achieved. A further important step was taken just recently when we introduced a system which will guarantee the free movement of capital between the three partner countries. Trade between the Belgium–Luxembourg Economic Union and the Netherlands has developed magnificently. In 1937, our imports from the Netherlands accounted for eight and a half per cent of our total imports. In 1953, they came to 14 %. In 1937, 11 % of our exports went there. By 1953, this had risen to 18 %. In other words, the Netherlands has become both our main supplier and our main customer, and we hold the same privileged position in the Netherlands. With its 20 million inhabitants and its industrial and agricultural potential, the union of the Benelux countries now holds third place among the world's economic powers, which means that it can make its voice heard at major international conferences. After ten years of efforts, we can be satisfied. The daring we showed has been rewarded. When we signed the 1944 Treaty, we were not just displaying confidence in the immediate future of our three countries but, something much more important, we were giving an example by being the first to set out on the path which leads to the future: the integration of Europe's strengths. Benelux is a great thing in itself and we are entitled to be proud of it, but it is also a step along the path towards a more useful, more decisive project: a united Europe. Despite the disappointments we sometimes feel as we work to turn this great ideal into a reality, we will go on fighting for it until we win, because we know that, along with peace, it will bring our peoples the high standard of living to which they aspire and which they richly deserve.