

Address given by Sean MacBride to the Council of Europe (Strasbourg, 11 August 1950)

Caption: On 11 August 1950, Sean MacBride, Vice President of the Organisation for European Economic Cooperation (OEEC) and Member of the Council of Europe's Committee of Ministers, outlines to the Consultative Assembly delegates the respective roles of MPs and national governments in the building of a united Europe.

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Mr. President and fellow parliamentarians, on behalf of the Committee of Ministers I would like to thank you for having kindly invited one of its representatives to attend your Debates on its Report and Message.

The Committee of Ministers has done me the honour of making me responsible for representing it before your Assembly, and explaining its point of view on the general questions raised in the course of the Debates which have been held here. It will also be my duty to report to my colleagues in the Committee of Ministers on any suggestions which may be made here during this Debate.

I am thus entrusted with the task of explaining to you the collective views of my colleagues in the Committee of Ministers. Because of this and the fact that the discussions held in this Committee are confidential under the terms of the Statute, as you know, I trust you will forgive me if I cannot reply in detail to all the questions put to me by the various speakers who have addressed this Assembly. In any case, it seems to me to be more useful to examine our work, and to discuss the critical growing period of the Council of Europe, in general terms rather than in detail.

I am wondering, my friends, whether you are aware of all that the fact of your presence and mine here today really signifies.

I do not intend to give an account of facts with which you are already all too familiar. You will recall that ever since the fall of the Roman Empire political philosophers and statesmen have been haunted time after time by the idea of a European union.

In modern times, from the 16th Century onwards, pages and pages have been written pleading the cause of European unity, not only in France, but in the great majority of European countries. The duc de Sully, the Abbé de Saint-Pierre, Bentham, Kant, Jean-Jacques Rousseau and many others have all busied themselves with this problem in turn.

After the First World War we witnessed the Pan-European Movement, and the efforts of Aristide Briand supported by many other European statesmen. We pay tribute to the memory of these statesmen and philosophers, because it is they who sowed the seed of the idea of European unity in our peoples' imagination. Unfortunately, they did not succeed in achieving concrete results.

It is true, of course, that a number of the proposals made at that time were aimed at the conclusion of an alliance rather than the achievement of unity. Once the danger was past, the efforts towards unity declined. That is perhaps a first lesson to be borne in mind.

At the moment our European civilization is faced with great perils, but let us beware of constructing the edifice of the Council of Europe on a purely temporary basis. I raise this question because it seems to me that on the reply to it will depend the whole system of philosophy we come to adopt in the course of our work.

While listening to your Debates, I had the impression that certain members of the Assembly were losing sight of the historical developments which have taken place in less than two years. For the first time in the history of Europe, we have an embryo European Parliament.

For the first time in the history of international organizations — and there have been many of them — we have one which is not purely and simply inter-governmental, but which represents both the Governments and the Parliaments of Europe. And this organization has been created in less than two years — in eighteen months, in fact.

I would not presume to apportion the praise which is due to those responsible for the birth of the Council of Europe; but if I am not mistaken, it was the members of the Committee of Ministers who drew up the Statute whereby the Council of Europe came into being; and, again, if I am not mistaken, it was the Parliaments of

our respective countries who ratified this Statute as it now stands.

It is inevitable that among fifteen different countries, in most of which there are a good number of political parties, there should be differences of view on the Statute itself, as well as on the functions of the Council of Europe, and on the relations which should exist between the Assembly and the Committee of Ministers, and between the Committee of Ministers and the various Governments.

I venture to think that even among you, Ladies and Gentlemen, there are many diverging views on all these questions. The important fact, however, is that you are all present here to-day; that you are representing fifteen different European countries, and that you are sharing in the work of the first European Assembly.

But who are you? To listen to certain criticisms directed against the tyrants who compose the Committee of Ministers, one would think that you were only insignificant persons of no influence or power. But is it not you, Ladies and Gentlemen, who in fact hold all the power? After all, it is you who, in each respective national Parliament, decide on the policies of our Governments and, if I am not mistaken, the tyrants who compose the Committee of Ministers depend on your support and even on the credits you agree to assign them in these Parliaments. So it is really you who hold all the power.

The symptoms which have appeared here are, in general, of a similar type to those which manifested themselves in each of our countries in the course of the development of parliamentary democracy; there is, however, a great difference, inasmuch as you now have greater powers than before.

You have not only the powers you are able to exercise in your own Parliaments, but also those granted to you in this Assembly under the terms of our Statute. You have, moreover, the chance of exerting a great deal of influence, not only on the march of events in your respective countries, but on the political, economic, social and cultural developments in fourteen other countries.

It is precisely because you have these new powers that it is necessary to use them wisely and not misuse them. This applies not only to the Assembly, but also to the Committee of Ministers.

It is always difficult for a number of people to agree on all matters; but when these people represent Governments of greatly varying interests and greatly varying constitutional and political traditions, it becomes even more difficult.

It is clear that, for lack of agreement, the Committee of Ministers can only advance as fast as the slowest.

What do the critics of the Committee of Ministers really desire? Do they really want the slowest to be left behind and separated from the Council of Europe? Are we sure that it will always be the same people who are lagging a little behind? Are we sure that we will always be ready to follow those who go rather more quickly than the others?

Would it be wise to impose conditions which would alienate, if not the whole of one of our countries, at least a large section of the public in several if not the majority of our countries?

Would it not be a somewhat curious procedure to try to begin unifying Europe by estranging from our activities one, or a number of countries which would really like to join us?

True, it would always be possible to conclude partial or regional federations; but would that, in the last resort, promote the closest unification of Europe? Might it not rather place new obstacles in our way?

These are questions on which the Assembly as well as the Committee of Ministers should reflect.

In a word, Mr. President, Ladies and Gentlemen, the progress made by the Council of Europe will depend on the extent to which the general public in our respective countries attaches importance to the attainment of an ever closer European unity. It is here that you, each one of you, can play a very important part, not only in

the Assembly, but in each of your Parliaments and your countries, in your capacity as parliamentary representatives, as leaders and spokesmen of public opinion.

For this reason it seems to me that some of the speeches which have been made here during the last few days would have been of greater value if they had been made in your national Parliaments.

As I have already said, you have a great many powers. The best proof of this lies in the fact that you have indeed acted on these powers, and successfully so. You have also obtained the Committee of Ministers' consent for the exercise of this power. In short, you are now authorised to draw up your own Agenda, provided only that it conforms to the Statute.

There is now a Joint Committee of representatives of the Assembly and of the Committee of Ministers, under the Chairmanship of your President. Yesterday, at your request, the French Minister of Foreign Affairs addressed you on the subject of his Plan: to-day a representative of the Committee of Ministers has come here to address your Assembly. You will have a chance to examine, discuss and make recommendations on the text of the Convention of Human Rights and other items on your Agenda.

Is this not very considerable progress to have been achieved in just a year?

Naturally, some people find flaws in the Statute; but do not forget, my friends, that many among you have already been wise enough to perceive that it would have been rash and premature to amend the Statute before gaining further experience.

Meanwhile, the Statute forms the basis of the rules which should guide our work. Do not let us forget that one of our principles is the "pre-eminence of law, on which all true democracy is based", and that the Statute is our law.

It is true that the attitude of the Committee of Ministers somewhat resembles that of a guardian who has a large number of children under his wing. It is inevitable that some parents should be more anxious than others. It is also inevitable that some children should be more difficult than others.

The duty of a guardian is to ensure that no harm comes to any of the children under his care, and that he does not forfeit the confidence of the parents. It may be that certain parents are over-anxious for the well-being of their children: it may be also that certain children wish to do foolhardy things too advanced for their age.

In its Message, the Committee of Ministers drew the Assembly's attention to the fact that one of the reasons underlying the creation of the Council of Europe was the consolidation of peace based on justice and international co-operation.

The Committee of Ministers has invited the Assembly to express its support of the action undertaken by the United Nations against the aggression in Korea.

As representatives of European countries whose philosophy is based on the principles of democracy and the desire for peace, it is our duty to express our condemnation of all aggression against peace and democratic principles.

It may be that certain criticisms made about the Committee of Ministers are not entirely unfounded, but it seems to me that those who have blamed the Committee of Ministers for not having initiated a debate on military affairs in the Assembly are going rather far. Even if the Statute of the Council of Europe permitted this, it should be remembered that there is already the Council of the United Nations, the Council of the Atlantic Pact, the Council of the Brussels Treaty and several other regional organizations and alliances which, after all, are responsible for military questions and defence matters. That is why your Committee on General Affairs showed much wisdom in the definition which it suggested during its discussions on this subject.

I take the liberty of reminding you of this definition as contained in paragraph 45 of its Report: “All questions, which in the ordinary way, would be answered in our national Parliaments by the Minister for National Defence should be excluded from our Debates; on the other hand, all questions which would be answered by the Minister for Foreign Affairs should be admitted.”

I do not commit myself to this definition, because I have not had an opportunity of discussing it with my colleagues in the Committee of Ministers. I would however point it out to you as being of possible value.

(Continuing in English.) In the course of the Debate, Lord Layton asked me a number of specific questions. I would like to thank him for the sympathy which he expressed and for the courteous manner in which he put his questions. I am sure, however, Lord Layton will appreciate that I am not in a position to answer them fully.

The first question is related to the Draft Convention on Human Rights, and in particular to the provisions relating to the right of petition and to the omission of guarantees concerning fundamental political rights. In relation to the right of a citizen to petition, I would like to draw the Assembly's attention to the fact that the Draft Convention as it comes before the Assembly contains an optional clause. This is an example of just what I sought to convey earlier in addressing the Assembly. You, as Representatives in the Assembly and as Members of your own Parliaments, can exercise your influence to ensure that the optional clause is availed of. Thus the work that emerges from the Assembly and from the Committee of Ministers can be given practical application in your respective countries.

Lord Layton asked whether the changes that have been made in the draft Convention were due to technical legal reasons or to political reasons. That, I am afraid, I am not able to answer; probably they were a combination of both.

Lord Layton asked whether or not the changes which appear in the draft text represent the views of the Committee of Ministers as a whole. They represent the views of the Committee of Ministers as they come before the Assembly, but very often the choice had to be made between being able to reach agreement on a modified text or having no text at all. In this case it was felt tatter to have a modified text than to have no text at all.

Again, complaint was made of the fact that consideration of certain proposals which had been put forward by some of the Committees of the Assembly, had been adjourned by the Committee of Ministers until later in the year. There again, it was felt that it was better to wait a month or two to enable the different Governments to consider and examine fully the implications involved. It was felt that in the long run a result more satisfactory to the Assembly would emerge from that procedure.

I am sorry not to be able to deal in more detail with these and many other questions which were put by Representatives of this Assembly, but they will realize that I must respect the confidence which my colleagues have reposed in me in representing them here.

(Speaking once more in French.) My friends, it is peace, it is the spiritual and moral values of our common heritage, individual freedom, political freedom and the pre-eminence of law, which form the basis of the Statute that has gained the adherence of our Governments and our Parliaments and brought them together here.

It is in this vast field that we should labour with all our might to create an ideal to which our people may adhere with faith and enthusiasm.

The conflicts with which the world is riddled begin in the minds, the consciences and souls of human beings. It is here, just as much as in the field of diplomacy or military strategy, that we, democrats as we are, should strive to win the battle. That is our mission.

This battle of the human conscience — we may well be victorious in it if we give firm and practical reality to the moral and spiritual values and the democratic principles of our civilization. It is by means of such an ideal that it will be possible to inspire faith in our aims, not only among our own peoples, but also among the other peoples of Europe who are not yet part of the Council of Europe.

My friends, I would ask you never to forget during your discussions that in order to succeed it is essential to convince the peoples of other European countries that our democratic ideal presents for them, as well as for us, the only hope of so organizing the human race that we may all live in peace.