

'Outlines of a workable European Assembly' from The Daily Telegraph (30 August 1948)

Caption: On 30 August 1948, H. D. Zimans, who covered the Congress of Europe for the British daily newspaper The Daily Telegraph, comments in the same newspaper on the French proposal for a European Consultative Assembly.

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Outlines of a workable European Assembly

BY H. D. ZIMAN

[The retiring French Government's proposal for a conference at which British, French and Benelux representatives should discuss the project of a consultative and advisory European Assembly has now received support from the State Department in Washington, as well as from M. Spaak, the Belgian Premier.]

The proposal follows lines suggested by the unofficial Congress of Europe at The Hague in May. Mr. Ziman, who attended it for The Daily Telegraph, here discusses the project.]

In the four days and nights that The Hague Congress lasted, idealists for immediate Federal Union for Europe were interlocked in animated and sometimes acrimonious discussion with a number of eminent politicians — all at the time out of office though not all in Opposition — who favoured "Western Union" or "United Europe," but were by no means pledged to an immediate federal solution.

Liberal economists, mainly insistent upon the dropping of tariffs and a rational distribution of industrial effort in Europe, found themselves at loggerheads with enthusiastic trade unionists anxious to place a non-Communist working-class movement in control of all European production. It is not surprising that a series of compromise resolutions were passed, in which incompatible views were sometimes masked under masterly ambiguities.

Premier & Mr. Churchill

Yet I can remember telling sceptics both at The Hague and latter at home that the Congress would have some practical outcome. I suggested that, quite apart from rubbing up idealists against experienced politicians to their immediate mutual benefit, there would be same tangible results when the politicians got home and could bring pressure on their respective Governments.

This has in fact happened. The pressure brought upon our own government by Mr. Churchill, with the backing of a number of M.P.s of all parties, has so far resulted, it s true, only in a non-committal reply from Mr. Attlee, echoing a similar answer made by Mr. Bevin when the matter was raised by M. Bidault six weeks ago.

The Prime Minister did, however, express benevolence towards the pursuit of the idea by unofficial bodies. It is worth observing that an unofficial "European Parliamentary Congress" is actually to meet this week at Interlaken, and 18 of the 25 British M.P.s who will pursue the question there are Socialists.

The late French Government was not merely converted to the idea of a European Assembly, but had proclaimed its intention of inviting the Governments of Britain and the Benelux Powers to send representatives, approved by their respective Parliaments, to an early preliminary conference.

No Parliamentary Status

This hearty French backing was not surprising, since the Cabinet contained M. Ramadier, the chairman of the Political Commission at The Hague, and M. Reynaud, who was particularly ardent there for a European Assembly.

Before we make up our minds on the merits of a new international debating Chamber we had better see what is meant. Prejudice could be raised for and against the plan by regarding it as a proposal for a common Parliament, with legislative powers and control over a European executive. Such a prospect would delight the Federalists and appal the note cautious among us, but the point is quite irrelevant at this stage.

Whatever the arguments may be for or against establishing "Federal Union Now" in Europe, they are not

applicable to the proposed European Assembly. It is not to have Parliamentary status.

The Assembly, as conceived at The Hague, would meet only as a deliberative and advisory body, and it is difficult to see why other nations of the British Commonwealth should take alarm, as Mr. Attlee seems to suggest they might, at even a preliminary Conference to define its conditions, which would still have to be approved by the Governments concerned before the Assembly itself met.

Four Aims in View

Although they have since been redefined in slightly different terms, the Assembly's objects would follow the general lines of The Hague resolution:

1. To stimulate and give expression to European public opinion;
2. To advise upon immediate practical measures designed progressively to bring about the necessary economic and political union of Europe;
3. To examine the juridical and constitutional implications arising out of the creation of such a union or federation and their economic and social consequences;
4. To prepare the necessary plans.

We can summarise these last three clauses, I think, by saying that the Assembly would have to consider what is meant by those vague phrases, "Western Union" and "United Europe," and to suggest how they can be translated into effect.

Possibly some Federal machine may be created in our lifetime, but most people would agree that there is a good deal which needs to be done quickly and cannot wait for Europe to be converted to the Federal idea — if it ever is converted.

An Assembly then, could carry on with greater deliberation than by no means entirely barren discussions on immediate European co-operation which kept the Congress up in all-night sittings.

Stimulating Opinion

The other purpose at which it is aimed — "to stimulate and give expression to European public opinion" — it would certainly fulfil. At The Hague Congress orators such, as Mr. Churchill and M. Ramadier reminded us that we are Europeans as well as Englishmen or Frenchmen. But a good deal more reminding is required.

To increase public interest, as well as on more general grounds, M. Reynaud put forward at The Hague a proposal that members of the European Assembly should be elected directly by universal suffrage on a basis of one member to every million of population. This was turned down, as was a rival suggestion that the Assembly should be composed of delegates of "representative organisations" such as trade unions.

Instead, The Hague Congress recommended that members of the Assembly should, be nominated by the respective Parliaments of the participating countries, though the representatives selected need not necessarily be themselves M.P.s.

That is the plan proposed by the French Government for bringing together 75 delegates from France, Britain and the Benelux countries to discuss plans for the Assembly, though these delegates would presumably not be bound to recommend a similar scheme for the Assembly itself.

Parliaments have, as one hostile critic has pointed out, no mandate from their electors to nominate for a European Assembly, and were in fact elected on quite different issues. It would be equally fair to say that Governments have no specific mandate from the electors to send representatives to international conferences of any kind.

It is therefore hard to see any constitutional objection to Parliaments — instead of Governments — for once nominating representatives to what is an international conference of a special kind. How far they would be entitled subsequently to ratify any resolutions of a European Assembly is a matter for consideration by each country's constitutional lawyers.

A much more serious problem lies in the constitution and procedure of the Assembly itself. At The Hague there were three practical obstacles to agreement which kept on superimposing themselves on the real differences of view.

Running to Length

First, many of those taking part seemed physically incapable of moving an amendment without making a long discourse; this applied to some of the British and most of the Continental delegates.

Secondly, many Continental delegates seemed impelled to introduce a whole philosophy of life into written documents, whereas the British wished to keep to the practical points of the resolutions without detailing reasons.

The third and most serious difficulty was the difference of procedure in different Parliaments. When an elder statesman, is ruled out of order by a foreign chairman on the ground that the subject has been discussed and decided, or when he is prevented from proposing a resolution because the steering committee consider it of minor importance, he is apt to take umbrage, and his countrymen rally round him.

In his own Parliament he would have had a right now denied him, and it is extremely difficult to pacify him with the subsequent explanation that the normal rule of some Parliament unfamiliar to him has been followed.

If a European Assembly is to reduce instead of increasing international friction, it must have very clearly understood rules of debate and a strong chairman. (My own nominee would be M. Rappard, the admirable Swiss delegate who took the chair at the stormiest plenary session at The Hague.)

Verbal Hard-Hitting

Members of the Assembly will also have to remember what some at The Hague forgot — that the verbal hard-hitting permissible within the limits of a Parliament all of whose members know one another arouses quite unintended reactions when directed against the former Prime Minister of another country.

All these problems may well arise again at Brussels or Geneva, or wherever the proposed Assembly would hold its sittings. Their existence is, however, an argument in favour of summoning such an Assembly rather than dismissing the idea as dangerous.

For if we are moving, as most of us hope, towards some eventual system of common European institutions, it will surely be useful to evolve now on a common European debating-ground, with no legislative or executive powers, an agreed procedure and an agreed political language for the body to which some day we may depute a degree of sovereignty.