

Address given by Jean Drapier at the Congress of Europe (The Hague, 8 May 1948)

Caption: On 8 May 1948, Jean Drapier, Principal Private Secretary to Paul-Henri Spaak, Belgian Prime Minister and Foreign Minister, emphasises to the members of the Political Committee at the Congress of Europe in The Hague the importance of establishing a precise definition of a democratic regime, as understood in Europe.

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Ladies and gentlemen, Mr Chairman,

I should like to start by making one point clear. The fact that I happen to work directly with Paul-Henri Spaak could give rise to certain conclusions in the minds of some delegates as regards my presence here today. I am here strictly in my personal capacity and in no way to represent the Prime Minister of Belgium. I was surprised to see the Belgian delegation putting forward a resolution which falls far short of covering the resolution put before us. It is a resolution on paragraph 4, the subparagraph beginning with the words 'will recommend immediate measures to establish progressively, at the economic and the political levels, the unity which Europe needs'.

The Belgian delegation, instead of giving a full picture of our discussions, would like the text in question to be amended in order to read as follows: 'The object is to establish, at the economic and the political and social levels, the unity which Europe needs'. Belgium and the Netherlands, working in very close cooperation, are currently experiencing a situation which is of inestimable value for Europe. A unity which is in the process of being created demonstrates to us the powerful advantages of such unity. The laws and social regulations in countries which propose to foster economic and political ties need to be defined. Alliances and political associations sometimes have consequences which make the task harder. What the Belgian delegation requests once again is that this Congress explain precisely what it means by democratic states. In paragraph 5, announcing that they may form a group within the Federation that we wish to establish, we call on democratic states to state that the union should be open to all European nations democratically governed and which undertake to respect the Charter of Human Rights. I think that the vital thing for us and for the general public in our respective countries is to know what we mean by human rights and what we mean by a democratic regime. It is virtually impossible in an assembly like this one to improvise solutions, and the only possible practical solution is to set up a committee from among our number which will immediately set to work on these two questions and draw up a draft charter; we can then refer to the charter which has been drawn up, amend it, or add to it in such a way that the text we refer to is a known text on which prior agreement has been reached. And we still need to define what a democratic regime is. So, again, we are asking that this same committee, to which we would give a fixed, short deadline, be instructed to give us its conclusions, but meanwhile, straight away, we need to say what a democratic state is not. And that, ladies and gentlemen, is why the Belgian delegation, which comprises all shades of public opinion in my country, proposes this: That the Congress instructs the same committee to submit to it, by the same deadline, a definition of a democratic regime, it being understood from the outset that no claim to that status can be made by any system which, in law or in fact, has blurred the distinction between the executive and the judiciary in the state which it governs by abolishing, along with the independence of the bench, the safeguards for those in the dock. We also ask for any system of government which does not guarantee freedom of the press or the freedom to circulate works of the imagination and works of art to be excluded from the concept of democratic peoples or democratic regimes. Therefore we also call expressly for us to say that the term 'democratic' does not apply to a system which sets up or tolerates the existence of a police apparatus with powers, in law or in fact, to deprive any citizen of his or her freedom without this citizen having access to effective judicial recourse whereby an independent authority may assess the reasons for his or her detention and put a stop to it if the grounds are not a breach of a published law. Lastly, we call for us to proclaim that under no circumstances can a system which, in law or in fact, abolishes the freedom to engage in political opposition within the parameters of the laws protecting freedom of thought, association and expression, claim to be democratic. This, ladies and gentlemen, is where I will stop, by pointing to one of the chief concerns of the Belgian delegation. We are here to map out a nebula, to give it its first frontiers, to give it its first framework, which we will gradually whittle down until we have managed to reduce it to the shape of a definite, compact object. If we are to succeed in raising immense hopes in all our countries, it can only be by being extremely clear. If we want to be backed, supported and carried shoulder-high by large popular movements in each of our countries, the organised workers are the ones we need to turn to, the forces freely assembled in free trade unions are where we are going to have to invest our chief hopes and put forward clear proposals. And that is why, with the same unanimity, the Belgian delegation proposes that you add to your resolution a text numbered 9, if you do not mind, to be inserted, that is, between the present No 8 and the present No 9, whereupon the latter would

become No 10 and the last paragraph would become No 11. The proclamation would be as follows: ‘The Congress now assigns to a united Europe the task of gradually establishing social democracy with the object of liberating man from all forms of subjection and economic insecurity, just as political democracy has the effect of protecting him from the arbitrary exercise of power.’ If this great call emerges from our Congress, I can assure you that, as far as the workers in my country are concerned, it will be heard. I can assure you that if we begin by clearly stating exactly what we do not want, what we stand up against with all the power of our being, what we want in the final analysis, then we will take the bulk of Europe’s peoples with us and we will build a united Europe.