

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

Caption: On 8 May 1948, Paul Reynaud, French MP and former Prime Minister, calls on the members of the Political Committee at the Congress of Europe in The Hague to be bold in adopting the principle of a truly European Assembly, elected by European people by universal suffrage, to take charge of Europe.

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Paragraph 2, which you now have before you for consideration, observes that our present institutions are inadequate as a solution to the European problem. I give it my full approval and I think that the only institution capable of saving Europe is the European Assembly. That is the sensitive issue. Depending on what you decide as regards this European Assembly, and particularly the appointment of its members, the Hague Congress will either be a milestone in the history of Europe or one more disappointment to add to so many.

The political report proposes an Assembly consisting of members of parliament and various other people appointed by members of the various countries' parliaments. The members of parliament will elect themselves. What mandate will these members have been given, however? They will have been given no mandate other than a purely national, exclusively national mandate. They will not have been given any sort of European mandate. They will have been mandated to defend the interests of their own countries and also, frequently, let us say it, the interests of their own constituencies.

The proposed Assembly, therefore, cannot be a European Assembly, with a European spirit: it will be a club of national members of parliament.

(Applause)

The general public in our various countries will remain completely indifferent to this creation. People will merely make fun of the MPs' liking for foreign trips interspersed with receptions.

(Smiles)

Why has progress towards European unity been so slow? We have a valuable supporting statement on this from a man who played an outstanding part in the conferences at which the question of Europe was debated. This is Paul-Henri Spaak, who played a substantial part in his dual capacity as Prime Minister and Foreign Minister.

What is Mr Spaak's assessment? He has said publicly: 'If we are to succeed, our peoples must hustle their governments'.

(Applause)

Setting up an Assembly is a heaven-sent opportunity for giving the people their say. And what is being proposed? This is what we hear: 'The people can keep quiet. We friends, we members of parliament, we are going to choose each other without interference and send each other to sessions in Europe's capital cities, whichever is nicest depending on the season.'

(Laughter)

This is the point on which we do not agree. We strongly believe that the problem is converting our peoples to the European ideal so that they leave their leaders a free hand to act for the common good of Europe. What actually happens at conferences? Ministers with their parliaments breathing down their necks, knowing in advance what criticism is going to be levelled at them if they give ground on this or that point, act as advocates for their national interests. No one speaks on behalf of Europe, and the inevitable result is that the Ministers do not agree on anything.

There is a solution, of course. A communiqué is issued saying that all is well and that experts are going to be appointed. All this does is just push everything down one more step and move still further away from a solution, because experts have no authority to pass judgment on national issues, let alone European issues. Experts are directly answerable to someone, the financial expert to the Minister for Finance, the economic expert to the Minister for Production and Trade, so that, inevitably, no solution can ever be achieved.

Let me give you an example. We are talking to Italy at the moment about the possibility of setting up a customs union. Let us suppose that the customs barrier itself is lifted.

Do you think that that would solve the problem? Not at all: there is still such a difference in social security charges between France and Italy that that is the first problem which has to be solved before they get onto the second one that the newspapers are talking about. You are left confronted with a major political problem that the experts are completely incapable of solving, which proves that the problem can only be solved by statesmen.

Of course, the report did leave us with some hope. It said: Yes, you are right, there needs to be a European Assembly, everyone agrees, but not yet, at some unspecified date in the future. Well, I am sorry to have to tell you that Europe has no time for hanging around, Europe is in a hurry because it is in danger, and I think that in the area of security there is no need for us to drag our heels. The news we are all hearing from America proves to me that there is a huge arms race going on in the world. I do not know of any occasion in history when an arms race has not ended in war. But even if it ended with the capitulation of one or other of the two opposing giants, you can see what major consequences it would have for European reconstruction. And if it came to war, you know what that would mean for all of us, because we have all been through that experience, and what it would mean if we showed ourselves incapable of acting together, as happened in the last war.

Do you really think that there is no need to hurry, that we have time, that we can discuss this European Assembly, which is the only way of building Europe, at a later date? I do not know if the general feeling here is that rebuilding the European economy is going to be easy with Europe cut in half, but I am afraid that it may be extremely difficult. Poor Europe — before the war it used to export four million tonnes of coal and now it imports 30 million tonnes. Actually, coal that has spent 20 days being transported costs as much because of the journey as it used to cost us at the pithead of the mine where it was extracted, which means a considerable increase in the cost price that Europe has to pay. Not to mention the fact that Europe has now split into two, whereas Eastern Europe used to feed Western Europe and was supplied with machinery by it in return.

But there is the American aid, you say. True enough. But however generous it is, the American aid is temporary, first of all, because it will only last five years at most. And the American aid is inadequate, because there is not enough of it for us to cover our total deficit in dollars. France, for example, will get 33 % less in dollars this year than it did last year.

Finally, American aid is haphazard because it depends on an annual vote by Congress and it depends on market conditions, which themselves depend on harvests, strikes, and so on.

Do you not think that America's rush to manufacture and stockpile armaments will lead to price rises? If prices rise in America, it means that American aid will shrink in proportion to that rise. In any case, the United States will only go on giving us aid, as they never stop telling us, if we show that we can implement reform by ourselves. So it is up to us now, it is up to us to be clear-sighted and determined. We need to redistribute the work in Europe and create a single market in the West. For example, it must be possible to make modern machines in Europe, such as calculators, which we cannot manufacture because in America, even though American workers are paid much more, the cost price is much lower because the market is bigger.

These are the reasons why, in order to put forward our conclusions, my friend Édouard Bonnefous, Chairman of the Foreign Affairs Committee of the French National Assembly, and I have tabled an amendment to Article 4 which establishes the European Assembly and which he will be coming here to defend shortly. Our wish is to keep these two dangers at arm's length: the illusion of immediately setting up a European parliament which passes laws, and the risk of impotence. Although, of course, nature does not make leaps and we have to move forward step by step, it is vital that the first step should not be a wrong step.

(Applause)

That, I believe, is the mistake which the text in front of us makes. We claim to be keeping our feet firmly on the ground by asking for the establishment of a European Assembly which truly is European because it will be elected by Europeans to look after Europe, by universal suffrage.

We think that we should tap the source of a new sovereignty by aiming for European sovereignty. We think voters should be voting as Europeans and not as British, French or Dutch citizens, and we think that, by making a lively appeal to people's imaginations, we will successfully solve the problem.

What are we really asking for? We are asking you to do immediately what the report suggests we do later, whilst forgetting to say why it would be better to do it later. That is why we think that every member of this Congress who is a member of their national parliament should table a bill, and support it, proposing that during the course of this year a European Assembly should be set up, elected by universal suffrage, by whatever voting method each country chooses, with one member per one million inhabitants. That, if I am not mistaken, would give France 41 members and Britain 46.

That is the specific proposal we will be asking you to vote on shortly. This conference will be judged by the world, both by the powerful democracy of the United States and by each of the countries we have the honour of representing here, on how far we have done something new, truly new, in setting aside a club of national members of parliament to replace it with a European Assembly.

Watch out! Jacques Bainville said that to make a federation you need a federating state. To our east there is a federating state, to the west there is not. But Jacques Bainville was wrong because there have been cases in history, particularly the case of the great American democracy, where people have come together in the face of great danger to achieve a grand design, and that is what we have to do. And while we watch that enormous federation being set up in Eastern Europe, moulded by the powerful hands of the Soviet Union, we, through our understanding, our courage and our daring, must achieve the same result, not so as to set the West and the East against each other, but to make the West capable of surviving, something which is currently in question.

(Applause)

We think that confining ourselves to old-school Communism is a purely negative approach, and that we will not build Europe by negotiating. Those who do not like Western Europe — and there are some, as you know — say that this way of thinking, this movement, is a reactionary way of thinking and a reactionary movement.

What is a reactionary? It is a person who lives with his face turned backwards, who cannot accept the modern world, who reacts against the current which carries the world with it, instead of taking the lead and guiding it. You will shortly be showing, I hope, that you are not reactionaries, that you know how to display those virtues which are vital in these tragic times in which we live, that you are not going to let this conference be just one more conference, full of magnificent speeches but without a firm decision.

It is because we will not allow that to happen that we say to you: do not be afraid of our peoples, think of what those peoples have to say and call on them to speak. They are the ones who will save you.

(Applause)