

## Address given by the President of the WEU Assembly on the operation of the organisation (21 September 1956)

**Caption:** On 21 September 1956, at a luncheon offered by the French Diplomatic Press Association, John Maclay, President of the Assembly of Western European Union (WEU), describes the role and mode of operation of his institution.

**Source:** National Archives of the United Kingdom, Kew. <http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk>, Records of international organizations, DG. Copies of records of the Brussels Treaty Organisation and Western European Union. Brussels Treaty Organisations and Western European Union: Microfilm copies of files, DG 1.

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Speech delivered by the Rt. Hon. John S. Laclay, M.P.,  
President of the Assembly of Western European Union,  
at a luncheon given by the French Diplomatic Press  
Association, on 21st September, 1956.

(Subject to changes during delivery)

THE ASSEMBLY OF WESTERN EUROPEAN UNION

It was with the greatest pleasure that I received and accepted your very kind invitation to be present at this luncheon. I would like to thank you, Mr. President, and through you the officers and members of your Association, first of all for a most excellent and delightful luncheon - and in doing so I know that I speak not only for myself but for my colleagues of the Bureau of our Assembly whom you have also honoured with your invitation.

But it is not only for an excellent repast that I thank you. It is a great privilege to have the opportunity of meeting so many of those on whom depends, among other important functions, the interpretation of what is happening in the world to an immensely wide public. As a mere politician I am often alarmed by the thought that my political speeches are going to be heard and perhaps commented on by a small - too often a depressingly small - audience. I am lost in admiration of the courage which is required in your profession where your words - subject to the vagaries of

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Editors - reach millions. But of course, while I recognise that there may be comparable hazards in your profession, you are not subjected to periodic inquisitions by the electors in a constituency, and that does give you the kind of freedom which a politician must treat with care.

But above all I am grateful for the opportunity of speaking to you, for a short time, about the Assembly of Western European Union of which I have the great honour to be President. Afterwards I will be happy to do my best to answer questions about our Assembly and its work, insofar as President I am competent to do so.

I have no need, I am certain, on this occasion to recall, in any detail, the origins of W.E.U. or its Assembly, but I, for one, cannot forget the situation which existed in the autumn of 1954 when it was realised that the European Defence Community, on which the hopes of a great many and the fears of some were centred, was not to be. That situation could, I believe, have developed into a very major crisis for our Western European nations and therefore for the whole free world. It is little short of astounding that within the relatively short space of about six weeks the London Conference and the Paris agreements produced a solution which, whatever its shortcomings, preserved and enlarged the whole concept of European unity and consolidated the strength of the entire North Atlantic alliance.

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May I just recall, as briefly as I can, some of the detail of the Paris Agreements, because it is from them that the work and importance of our Assembly stems? There were four-Power agreements to end the Occupation régime and to restore sovereignty to the German Federal Republic. There were fourteen-Power agreements covering the rearmament of the Federal Republic, its entry into NATO and the strengthening of the whole NATO structure. There were seven-Power agreements covering the accession of Italy and Germany to the former Brussels Treaty Organisation, renamed Western European Union, and there were all the related protocols covering the strength of the armed forces of the seven countries on the mainland of Europe; undertakings by the Federal Republic not to manufacture certain types of weapons; the setting up of an Armaments Control Agency and, as a later development, a Standing Armaments Committee. There were of course, also, provisions relating to the Saar.

A vital part of Western European Union of course was the commitment by the United Kingdom to maintain on the mainland of Europe four divisions and the second tactical airforce or their equivalent in fighting strength and not to withdraw them against the wishes of the majority of the high contracting parties - a unique event in the history of my country's relations with the other nations of Western Europe - and finally, of course, the new W.E.U. took over all the functions of the Brussels Treaty Organisation including the very important ones of Social and Cultural co-operation.

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I have ventured to recall these details even to you because I have found in my own country and in other countries that the immense significance and potential importance of W.E.U., not only for the past but for the future, only too often has been forgotten, swamped in the rush of history in which, unfortunately, we are all living today.

It is the all important task of our Assembly to help the Governments who signed these agreements to do the work to which they set their hands and it is our duty to maintain constant parliamentary pressure upon the Council of W.E.U., and for that matter on national Governments, whenever we feel that the Governments who signed the Agreements, which our Parliaments ratified, may be lagging in their task. Before I tell you something of how we try to do this, I would like to describe briefly how our Assembly came into being.

The Paris Agreements included a clause, some four and a half lines long, which must constitute the shortest charter on which any Parliamentary body ever was founded. These are the words:

"The Council of W.E.U. shall make an annual report on its activities, and in particular concerning the control of armaments to an Assembly composed of representatives of the signatory Powers to the Consultative Assembly of the Council of Europe."

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That is all - some forty words - and on these we have built our Assembly. To those who are interested in the development of European Parliamentary institutions I would emphasise that this new Assembly does represent something different from both the Common Assembly and the Consultative Assembly of the Council of Europe. Admittedly like the Consultative Assembly we have no executive or supranational powers. But I believe that in a limited field we must have a new form of influence over the collective acts of governments in pursuance of Treaty obligations when a group of governments have bound themselves to make an annual report to us on their collective activities under these Treaties. This must imply an obligation to pay due regard to the debates and recommendations of our Assembly and its committees, on those matters on which the Council is bound to submit a report. I will not elaborate the point, but I believe that it can have great importance for the future of international parliamentary bodies. Then, again, unlike the Consultative Assembly, which had its charter and rules laid down by the sponsoring governments and is still arguing with its Committee of Ministers on questions of interpretation and amendment, we were invited by the Chairman of the Council at our joint meeting to draft our own rules and methods of procedure.

This we did and after some intensive discussion with the Council - on whom of course we are dependent for our funds - we have set up what I believe to be an efficient, economical and thoroughly democratic

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parliamentary structure. We have complete control of our agenda. Our Clerk and his staff are responsible only to the Assembly and we ourselves prepare our own Assembly budget for subsequent negotiation with the Council. I might mention that our Budget for 1956 was only 59,000,000 francs, and our total full-time staff is at present only eleven, supplemented of course by temporary staff during full sessions of the Assembly at Strasbourg.

These details, of course, are only of procedural interest, but I would submit that they are not purely academic. If one thinks in terms of the development of this new type of parliamentary institution which has emerged since the war, they do represent something very interesting, and they may help in the continuing evolution of multinational parliamentary institutions which stop short of the supranational; and for my part I am convinced that this type of Assembly has come to stay and has an all important part to play in the future of international relations.

What are we doing with all this? Is our existence justified? Or are we just another debating society, providing perhaps an opportunity for members of parliament of seven nations to get to know each other - and that alone is important enough - but are we anything more?

Well - W.E.U. came into formal existence only some eighteen months ago. Our Assembly has not yet completed its first full year of organised existence, but already our Committees are in full action. W.E.U. has

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continued the admirable if little known work of the Brussels Treaty Organisation on Social and Cultural co-operation between originally the five and now the seven nations. We are faced in our Assembly with certain problems here of relationship with the Council of Europe. We are all extremely anxious to avoid duplication of effort and equally anxious to maintain the unity of the fifteen. But there can be no doubt that in many cases seven can do what fifteen cannot and our effort will be to preserve the effective work of the seven while making certain that whenever possible the benefit of that work is extended to the fifteen. All this is under discussion and will be debated in Strasbourg when we meet in October.

But our most urgent task is on matters of defence - the control of armaments, the work of the Standing Armaments Committee of W.E.U. - a task which only our Assembly is competent to debate.

Our Committee on Defence Questions and Armaments has met repeatedly during the last twelve months. It has sent questions to the Council - it has received replies - it has had joint meetings with representatives of the Council - it will shortly visit SHAPE and discuss its problems with General Gruenther and General Norstad.

Its report will be presented to the Assembly for discussion at Strasbourg on October 12th and there is every prospect of an intensely interesting debate - because the subjects covered are of critical

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importance. What progress has been made in setting up an effective system of armaments control? If there have been delays who or what has caused them? Is the work of the Standing Armaments Committee showing any results? Is standardisation a practical reality or only a theoretical exercise? Is it even a desirable exercise? All these questions will be debated in the light of plans for the "reconversion" of troop equipment at present being considered.

And one all important question has still to be argued out which bears heavily on the future work of our Assembly. Does the Council interpret the Paris Agreements widely or restrictively, bearing in mind the responsibilities taken over from the Brussels Treaty Organisation? The form this question unavoidably must take is how much information can or will the Council give to the Assembly on questions of broad Defence Policy which could vitally affect the more detailed work of the Control Agency and the Standing Armaments Committee. Are such questions only the affair of the member governments when they meet as part of NATO or have the member governments a clear responsibility as Western European Union and therefore a duty to enable the Council to keep the Assembly properly informed? This last problem has certain obvious and far-reaching implications which will certainly be explored in the Assembly's debate.

Mr. President - you will by now have realised that I am intensely interested in the work of our Assembly and have a profound belief in its potential importance not only to the seven member nations but, because ./.

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of its peculiar competence, to the whole free world. Whether that belief will prove justified will depend on many factors - the sense of responsibility of the Assembly - the willingness of governments to pay due attention to its acts and needs - and perhaps most important of all our ability to catch the interest and attention of some or all of you who are present here today and through you at least the thinking public. I cannot promise you fireworks at our October meeting - they sometimes go off when least expected - but I do believe that really valuable work will be done and I do profoundly hope that you will think the same.