Jacques-Camille Paris, The Council of Europe's role in European politics

Caption: On 24 February 1950, in Rome, Jacques-Camille Paris, Secretary General of the Council of Europe, gives an address on the role of the Council of Europe in the policy for European unification.

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The Council of Europe's role in European politics (Rome, 24 February 1950)

I have to confess that I find the breadth of our topic for discussion this evening somewhat intimidating. Whilst I have relatively little trouble in talking about the structure and organisation of the Council of Europe, any discussion of its place in European politics is likely to give rise to interpretations, none of which are 'written in stone'. We ought to begin with a proper definition of the Council. The Preamble to its Statute, and Article 1 thereof, represent a compromise which was reached at after some debate, and they say nothing about the legal status of the Council, except that it is 'an organisation which will bring European States into closer association', for a variety of purposes which are listed. This being so, we ought to be able to say what the Council is and what it is not: it exists, yes; but, at the same time, it does not belong in any recognised legal category because, as things stand, it is not an alliance or a confederation of states, and certainly not a federal state. There appears to be unanimous agreement that it marks the start of something new and that it is born of an intrinsic sense of unity amongst the peoples of Europe and of an acknowledgement of their weakness.

So we need to realise straightaway that, when we speak of Europe, we mean something which is better defined as a way of life, a body of interests, political principles and moral values rather than a geographical area.

Moreover, this post-war Europe, like that of the 19th century and the year 1919, has problems of balance. The simple issue of Germany provides ample proof of that. But whatever solutions are sought with a view to establishing a balance within Europe, they are dominated by a new factor of overriding importance: the diminished power of the European countries as a whole compared with the two great powers which are not part of Europe — Russia and the USA.

Faced with this finding, the wisest heads in Europe have wondered whether the destruction caused by the war is the only reason for their countries' weakness. Their conclusion is that the root of the problem lies deeper. The current political organisation of Europe, divided by borders now more strongly drawn, is no longer appropriate to the demands of contemporary society.

The economic, social and cultural needs of the present day are such that no one European country on its own can provide a sufficiently broad framework within which the forces characteristic of our era may develop fully and thrive.

For the Americans, who view Europe — with unease — as a troubled and unstable region, constantly beset by danger and by crises likely to throw the world into turmoil, the only answer to the problem of Europe is a process of unification which would give Europe an economic standard of living and a power more commensurate, as they see it, with Europe's wealth of human and natural resources. And it is true that, despite the cataclysm of World War Two and the havoc it wrought, Europe today has much the same level of manpower, technical skills and, maybe, even natural resources as the other continents.

The problem as it stands is not likely to be resolved by diplomatic means alone.

We need not only to align existing forces but to rearrange their constituent elements and, above all, to bring on board new ones which, in the present climate of our divided continent, cannot but appear as vain and fanciful ideas.

At the same time, we must not forget that existing barriers have their roots in history. Even the latest artificial economic barriers have led to situations here and there which are out of step with one another and which have to be overcome gradually. The differences are not just economic, they are institutional, too; they are born of differing political mind-sets and public sensitivities.

There are two reasons, furthermore, why we cannot move from division to unity in one fell swoop but can do this only gradually. The first reason is that Europe does not, at present, have the necessary reserves of energy to contemplate major upheavals lightly; the second is the existence of a sense of solidarity which is

one of the positive aspects of contemporary society and will prevent us from repeating the worst of those political and social experiments in which we engaged in the past, without regard for the immediate needs of our peoples.

European economists have been working for three years to unify the European economy on the basis of the proposals put forward by General Marshall; other attempts at increasing economic ties and trade currently being explored include the Franco-Italian customs union, Benelux, Finebel and Uniscan.

There is no denying that some progress has been achieved and that others are on the point of completion, but, increasingly, there is an impression that negotiations on technical issues alone will not get us very far. The innovative nature of the measures proposed conflicts with a number of existing interests, and this resistance can be overcome only by an overwhelming political consensus. The politicians and technical experts who have to deal with the essence of the issues must draw the authority which they need for success from the public.

You will have seen that, in talking of the unification of Europe, I began by referring to the economic problems, adding that solutions to those problems were conceivable only as part of an overall political design. It is, I believe, one of the oddities of our time that anyone might imagine that this could be done in the opposite way. Unifying Europe in economic terms is a long-term endeavour which will take years. So this is no casual undertaking; it constitutes a positive statement of belief, a political act, all the more ambitious in that the road to economic union, even if we tread it carefully, is strewn with difficulties and even with snares. Since this is a political act, why not acknowledge it as such and accept the consequences?

Numerous critics who have been asking themselves this question have accused the member governments of the Council of Europe of dragging their feet and dithering. Whether or not these views are justified, it has to be said that, in founding the Council of Europe, with its Committee of Ministers and its Consultative Assembly, the governments showed that they had understood their role, which is sometimes to be ahead of public opinion and to provide it with the instruments that it needs to refine and define its own aspirations.

The purely advisory role of the Assembly, the system of voting in the Committee of Ministers which requires unanimity for the most important decisions, the fact that the Council is authorised to make no more than recommendations to governments — all these precautions have caused impatience and irritation. That is understandable, given the seriousness of Europe’s position. But, when I see how easily this impatience can turn into disappointment and scepticism, I wonder if it is not also the result of nervousness induced by the tragic events we have recently experienced and also of this habit that we have, engendered by war and dictatorship, of assuming that our governments will take care of things and sitting back and leaving them to get on with it.

We need to appreciate that the job of giving Europe the institutional framework that it needs cannot be accomplished overnight. What we need to do is to state loud and clear our intention of following a consistent course of action and to define what that course is. A propos of this, I should like to pick up on an idea from an article that I read in a Belgian periodical *La Revue Nouvelle*. (The author’s name is Fosty.) It is an idea which seems to me fundamental: ‘The well-being of the working class, like the status of the other classes, correlates closely with international cooperation. Internationalism is no longer tied to class struggle but controls the being or non-being of the nations, as it does their well-being. To a large extent the world economy determines the degree of spiritual freedom enjoyed by all classes and all countries.’

Never mind the author’s apparent fondness for the idea that, if you deal with the economic aspects, the rest will follow — what is striking is the expression ‘spiritual freedom’. It is this spiritual freedom which we must achieve. It seems beyond doubt that Europeans find it very hard to shrug off received ideas, especially in politics. Nor is there little doubt that they are vaguely aware that they urgently need to adopt new formulas; but, at the same time, they are wary of embracing any specific change because they feel trapped, as citizens or members of a social class, by ideas which are all the more rigorous for being linked to interests to which they cling desperately in the face of a future which is unclear. Yet new generations are appearing who will not be too happy with the chaos into which their parents have plunged them. Are we to leave them

to find their way alone? Surely we have a duty to sort out now what is good, what is less good and what is bad in what we ourselves have inherited?

Have we not allowed the good things handed down to us to be stifled in political frameworks which were once excellent but whose value is now debated and probably debatable? Many of the best-informed people remain reluctant to give an unequivocal answer to this last question; I do not know if it is possible to know every aspect of the problem and to resolve it rationally in such a way as to remove all room for doubt. It seems to me that it is enough to be convinced, and it seems to me that our young people are convinced that we must not hesitate: I am sure that they are right.

That said, the job may be a long one, but, specifically because it is a long one, we should make a start on it right away.

The question of strengthening the powers of the Council of Europe was one of the first to be addressed by the Assembly and debated by the Committee of Ministers. That issue has been referred to the Assembly's General Affairs Committee, and it will be putting forward specific proposals shortly.

However, the authority which an institution acquires through the efficiency of its work and its high profile in political circles and in public opinion cannot be secured simply be strengthening its powers. It is specifically from this point of view that the Assembly's first session in Strasbourg was a success.

The Assembly recognised the political nature of its remit; it realised that forging a single society out of several similar but separate societies is something which cannot be achieved all at once.

The starting point for any effective strengthening of European unity cannot be a plan to create unity; such a plan is necessarily an outcome. The aim is not to give shape to something not yet created but to awaken the forces which will create it. In other words, the aim is to penetrate the fabric of political interests already at work, encouraging the forces which foster unification and discouraging those which have the opposite effect.

The first item to be considered is thus the current policy of the 13 member states of the Council, and of the countries which will be joining the original members, in order to make the best possible use of the substance common to all of them. The only justification for a powerfully based institution is that the policies of the various European countries should, from the outset, share a group of common goals which are difficult to attain without concerted effort.

It is worth looking more closely at a few aspects of the Assembly's work — which has only just begun — because they illustrate the wide range of interests which bind us, over and above the partial contrasts and even differences which separate us.

Perhaps the first and most important question arising in the course of the Assembly's work last summer, one subsequently taken up by the Committee of Ministers and the Standing Committee, is the admission of new members. Of central importance here are Germany and the Saarland.

There are many reasons why Germany should be locked in to the Western system — the wish to have this country, rich in energy resources, on board, and the wish to reconcile Germany's economic recovery with the economy of the other European nations and to avoid ruinous competition.

However, above all, we must, once and for all, persuade the Germans to follow the path of true democracy, keeping them away from the temptation to engage in dictatorial experiment and military adventure into which they are so easily seduced. A Germany tied in to a system of parliamentary democracy will be less likely to make desperate choices.

By virtue of her energy and her resources, Germany has the potential to be either a great support for or a great threat to the European democracies. Only her membership of a group made stable by the combined

weight of the other countries, Great Britain included, can offer sufficient guarantees and the hope for a gradual strengthening of her democratic spirit.

The Standing Committee of the European Assembly rightly insisted on a precondition for Germany's admission to the Council of Europe. The resolution adopted by the Standing Committee on this subject says 'The Standing Committee has decided to give a favourable response to the Committee of Ministers' request for an opinion on this point, because it is convinced that West Germany must be given a place in the European framework which the Council represents; but it believes it is vital, before the Federal Republic of Germany joins, that she must have declared her willingness to abide by the terms of the Statute and have given a clear sign of her intention to do so.'

But the founder members of the Council also have a job to do, namely to give life and form to the organisation in Strasbourg. The participating countries, old or new, will be all the more bound by their common endeavour if this has more decisive implications for the future of them all. This is why, and I come back briefly to that point, it is essential to waste no further time in strengthening the Council's resources for action. The first step in this direction will be taken this year. We must lay political foundations which are solid enough to restore to all the countries of Europe, with no ulterior motive, an awareness of the value that they represent for the group as a whole within a common framework.

The way in which the question of Germany was addressed underlines the spirit of collective enterprise practised by the Council, a spirit which is unashamedly democratic and rooted in a firm belief in the free development of the human personality.

Europe has known happy times when it seemed that there could be no threats to freedom — no external perils and no internal crises. These illusions now seem far distant, buried beneath the ruins of two world wars. We know how many threats now exist to what remains of our freedoms, and in particular, the threat of a third and final conflict.

The Strasbourg Assembly took the view that one of the essential points of a common political programme was a collective agreement to safeguard the very basis of freedom, and, in the course of an extremely interesting debate, it drafted a Convention for the protection of human rights.

This draft has been laid before the Committee of Ministers and is currently being studied by a committee of government experts set up by the Ministers.

The purpose of this Convention would be to prevent a country under threat of totalitarianism from being gradually taken over by evil whilst everyone else stood idly by. The text drawn up by the Assembly also provides for the establishment of a Commission, which will rule on the admissibility of cases, and a European Court empowered to rule on all violations of the basic rights listed in the Convention.

I should like to make two comments here:

— one — the work of the Assembly and its Legal Affairs Committee has been conducted with a very marked sense of reality. With a view to maximum efficiency, the number of guaranteed rights has been limited, and a number of rights which are likely to be controversial have been left out.

— two — I hope that I am not being overoptimistic in saying that the mere fact that the question was debated is of considerable political significance.

The efforts of the Assembly and its committees in the economic field have already been broadly welcomed by the European press. Rather than analysing these in detail, I shall confine myself to sketching the broad outlines of the work begun.

The issues addressed are well known to members of the public who are *au fait* with world affairs. It is fair to say, I think, that they are the bread and butter of government officials.

None of the domestic markets of any of our countries is big enough on its own to support highly profitable manufacturing, that is to say, costs which will establish a good trade balance and offer adequate competition with American production.

Ideally, the aim should be to create a single European market and focus on specialised production, both these aspects being essential if we are to bring down costs.

Accordingly, the problems of 'liberalising' trade have been discussed, together with those of the free movement of labour and capital and currency convertibility. On the latter subject, the Committee on Economic Affairs has drawn up a plan for a European stabilisation fund, the imprint of which is visible in the project debated by the OEEC.

But, whilst the OEEC remained within the boundaries of the plan put before it, the Council of Europe's Committee on Economic Affairs formulated proposals which went further, stating that nothing tangible and sustainable could be achieved in the monetary field unless the financial, budgetary, trade, industrial and agricultural policies of the various countries were coordinated at the same time.

One of the transitional measures studied as a way of easing the impact of conversion from one system to another was the preparation of a plan for the establishment of European companies. The basic idea is this: in addition to the compartmentalised economies currently existing in Europe, there would be a free economic sector in which companies would develop to focus on the production of goods for which Europe perceived an urgent need. This system might include public or private companies, regulated by a specific set of rules and set up with the authorisation of an office which would be an agency of the Council of Europe and subject to scrutiny by the Council.

Lastly, Europe's dollar deficit and the 1952 deadline, when Marshall Plan aid will cease, plus the measures envisaged to unify and improve the European economy, have prompted common action to secure a reduction in US customs tariffs.

As you can see, the topics discussed are necessarily those being discussed in other international organisations, in the OEEC in particular.

The Council of Europe does not intend to replace existing specialist organisations or to deploy legions of experts. I should say, in passing, that the Council Secretariat is made up of a very small number of officials, just enough to provide the Committee of Ministers and the Assembly with the services that they need to do their work properly.

The remit of the Council of Europe is quite different from that of the other international institutions. In order to perform it, the Council needs to tighten its ties with these organisations and with the OEEC in particular. The specialised knowledge acquired and classified by the specialist institutions must serve as a starting point for the Council's political work, and conversely, the policy guidelines of the Council must be reflected in the practical work done by the specialist organisations.

Economic insecurity and political insecurity are two sides of the same coin. The Council of Europe has no military powers. If no objections have, to date, been raised to this aspect, it is because everyone realises that there is a place for a security dimension to exist side by side with the establishment of armed forces and strategic planning. This is the harmonious development of economic, social and technical forces, of the political organisation of society, in conditions which will enable the latent energies of the world created by the industrial revolution to expand.

Those who heard some of the speeches in the Strasbourg Assembly last summer know that, if we wait too

long before reorganising Europe and adapting it to the world situation, it will be hard to avoid a serious economic crisis when the Marshall Plan comes to an end. Economic crises mean living standards below acceptable limits for the masses and unemployment, and that leads to dangerous social unrest.

I referred, at the start of our little discussion, to the many snares along the road to this economic unification which is so necessary. We must also beware here of failing to give in-depth consideration to the decisions we take. Our markets may be opened up simultaneously to fierce competition, which would create unemployment where there currently is none, and would have the general effect of reducing wages and welfare assistance. This is one of the most problematic aspects of the situation.

Human freedom and dignity are exalted values which are difficult to uphold for those suffering from hunger and despair. States of mind like these are more prone to extreme solutions and explosions of violence. The Assembly has several times urged the world to think about who ultimately benefits from such a state of affairs, at the same time stressing the importance of certain social realities which are a prerequisite for closer economic collaboration.

We must aim for a mean level of welfare safeguards which is as close as possible to that of the most advanced countries. The countries which are less advanced in this regard must be helped; they must make every effort themselves to provide their people with adequate welfare legislation and eliminate or reduce unemployment. The most advanced countries, on the other hand, must seek to absorb some of the labour surplus on terms which are the same for all.

I know how close this last point, emphatically made by Italian spokesmen especially in the Assembly's Committee on Social Affairs, is to Italian hearts.

I shall add, if I may, that the question of migrant workers, so important to Italy, has just recently provided one of the first proofs of how effective the Council of Europe is.

The International Labour Conference adopted a Migration for Employment Convention on 1 July 1949. One month later, the Council of Europe's Consultative Assembly considered this Convention and recommended that it be adopted. In November, the Committee of Ministers, endorsing the views of the Assembly, recommended that member state governments ratify the Migration for Employment Convention.

Other aspects of the situation also need to be considered. National consciousness, which contributed so much in the last century to shaping a modern Europe, is nevertheless a sentiment prone to excess and intransigence, fed by a long series of wars.

Steering the nations back to a proper awareness of their own individuality and stressing the value of their specific characters, while at the same time developing a desire to work together with other peoples — these are the essential guidelines which a European cultural programme must follow.

Human dignity, spiritual freedom and, indeed, the ability to understand the point of a policy of cooperation require a sound basis of cultural awareness.

This, outlined very briefly, is the political, economic, social and cultural thinking on which the work of the Council of Europe is built.

I hope that I have managed to give you an idea of the intrinsic unity of these ideas, based on the fact that they reflect vital shared interests and include nothing to which a true democracy could object.

I have emphasised these points rather than other debates and activities to which I have simply referred in passing and which are concerned with improving the Council's operations and strengthening its powers, because it is my firm belief that this strengthening of its powers will necessarily follow, once an overall programme is in place.

I am aware that some debates on formal issues have briefly attracted far more attention than the positive aspects of the work actually done. The mistake is understandable. Our job is to classify the needs common to all of us and show that they can be met only through shared endeavour. We have made a start on this.

A question arises here: should we be aiming, as some people think, to persuade leading politicians of the need for union — and I do not just mean governments? Should we, true to a sacred doctrine of democracy, seek to persuade nations on the basis of these arguments that, whilst it is the duty of the politicians to provide information and allow adequate political forces to develop, their role must be limited to interpreting the general will, once that will is known?

I put this to you not, I hope, as a leading question but as one which highlights the weighty responsibility which political leaders bear. All too often, I have heard the question: ‘should we woo the government or the people?’, and the answer is: ‘the people’. This is too simplistic, because it devalues the politicians’ responsibility.

It is true that the first and most important step was taken by governments, in setting up an Assembly to devise and disseminate a policy of union. However, we must not forget that we are not living in a period of stability. There are clamours for attention on all sides. At the very least, political leaders have a duty to be clear, to formulate their plans clearly and to uphold them. Members of the public have no idea what a policy of European union means; they would be more likely to take a negative view, because their conditioned reflex is to be wary of overambitious ventures which can crush the individual. How can we forget that the 19th century, which saw the founding of nation states as we know them today as liberating, left us in the end with national frameworks which are manifestly too narrow?

So I do not think that I am wrong in saying that it is initially incumbent on governments to say what has to be said, because I am sure that the general feeling, after the disillusionments of recent years, is, above all, one of impotence.

Today, the politicians and wisest heads throughout Europe face the same duty: they must show that working together is the only way to keep European freedom and independence safe and how much stronger the peace will be if our countries, made economically and morally stronger by union, are no longer a group of weakened elements — at the mercy of other people’s desire for domination and violence. The governments must make every citizen aware of his personal responsibility in this great debate. Public opinion will then win through.

Two more of the questions debated by the Council in the course of its work warrant attention:

ideological differences between the European governments, and relations with the British Commonwealth.

On the first point, it should be said that the exigencies of modern society have markedly narrowed the gap between Liberal and Socialist politics. Undoubtedly, an ambitious programme offering sophisticated welfare guarantees of the kind that we were discussing just now is common to both political tendencies — Socialist and Liberal — and fairly broad state control is inevitable. For proof of that, one needs only to look at the manifestos on which a lively election campaign is currently being fought in Britain.

In these circumstances, the collective resolution of certain European issues ought not to face insurmountable obstacles. If regional agreements such as Finebel and Uniscan, linking countries with more similar political bases, are able to smooth the way for broader constructions, we may only welcome this.

As regards the Commonwealth, the Assembly and the General Affairs Committee have restated the principle that firm ties between Great Britain and the world system of which it forms the centre are in the best interests of Europe as a whole. By the same token, the Commonwealth can only gain from a European recovery which would restore the prestige that Europe formerly enjoyed in the nations of Asia and Africa

and provide the energy that those peoples still need for their development.

Something which the Council of Europe values greatly is the appreciation with which its efforts are received in the USA. The European community is unquestionably part of a wider community of free nations, linked by shared cultural roots. American aid is proof of that, as is the interest shown by the US press in the Assembly's summer session. In fact, American correspondents were some of the most interested and most perceptive observers of the work done in Strasbourg.

My aim has been to show you clearly enough what our intentions were in founding the Council of Europe and the trends which have emerged since the inaugural session of the Committee of Ministers and the Consultative Assembly was held last August. We have witnessed the start of an internal restructuring of Western Europe, and it will undoubtedly take time to finish the job.

I referred just now to the sense of impotence felt by the general public after so much disillusionment. Thus, all too often, we hear the question 'who is all that directed against?' from people taken in by cynical and seemingly profound propaganda. The answer is 'no one', but that answer is too simple and unlikely to convince. The Council of Europe has no foreign policy as such, and I am almost tempted to say that it is a pity, as it would be easier if it did. As for the military defence of Europe, other bodies are responsible for that. The real question is 'against what?' The answer is in no way backward-looking, nor is it born of despair. To accept, even reluctantly, that a supposedly modern political formula being fed to us by insistent propaganda has more authority than the one we know and love, is already to admit defeat. The revolutions of the 19th century, precisely because they were successful, have left us with a tendency to resignation here, and we would do well to think about where this comes from and to be wary of it. Indeed, this tendency does not exist in all the member states of the Council. It is not just a matter of politics, furthermore, but of a struggle which is as old as creation and will end only when Good finally triumphs over Evil.

On the matter of politics, which brings us back to the Council of Europe, the common objective is to organise our affairs in such a way as to rid ourselves of the uncertainties which burden our lives and to set ourselves free. It is our everyday work which will enable us unthinkingly to answer the question 'against what?'

In conclusion, I want to tell you how pleased I am to have had this opportunity to outline a few ideas on the Council of Europe before an Italian audience. I know how interested this country and its government are in the Council, and I value the contribution which Italy's representatives have made to the Assembly. As for the Foreign Minister, Mr Sforza, I would venture to say that he is a man of Europe as much as a man of Italy! He has, in truth, devoted much of his life and work to the fostering of international cooperation.

In their efforts to rise again from the ashes of war, the people of Italy and their leaders have, in this post-war period, demonstrated the reserves of energy which this country possesses. I see in this a pledge of Italy's ability to contribute to the unification of Europe. I am certain that the Italian people are clear about the goal to be attained. I know that they have the qualities needed to accept some sacrifices and to give of their best in the common endeavour.