

## 'What may we expect from the European Assembly?' from Le Figaro (10 August 1949)

**Caption:** On 10 August 1949, the day of the first session of the Consultative Assembly of the Council of Europe, the French daily newspaper Le Figaro emphasises the symbolic value of the institution, whilst also highlighting its limited political influence.

**Source:** Le Figaro. 10.08.1949. Paris. "Que peut-on attendre de l'Assemblée Européenne?", auteur:Aron, Raymond.

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## What may we expect from the European Assembly?

by Raymond Aron

No one will question the symbolic value of the meeting in Strasbourg of the Council of Europe and, in particular, that of the Consultative Assembly. The representatives of the ten sovereign states, chosen by the governments or elected by the parliaments, will together constitute an embryonic European Parliament. The optimists will say that, only a few years ago, such an event would still have appeared utterly inconceivable.

Unfortunately, or perhaps not, institutions do not live by their 'symbolic value'. If the European Assembly turns out to be more given to talk than to action, if it becomes obsessed with details or, conversely, with grandiose and unrealisable plans, if it follows the directives of the Committee of Ministers too slavishly, or indeed sets itself up in vehement opposition to it, the disappointment will be commensurate with the hopes unwisely raised. The risk of disappointment is the greater the more difficult it is to see what the Council of Europe should do to justify its existence.

### **Economic cooperation**

European cooperation has certainly not been paralysed by the absence of contacts between ministers or by the lack of technical committees. The OEEC has already developed a huge bureaucracy, conforming to the natural law by which all administrations (especially international ones) proliferate. The 'Five' have their headquarters at Fontainebleau.

At the economic level, efforts have, hitherto, met with resounding failure. Despite the solemn declarations, there is less authentic cooperation today between the countries of Europe than there was before 1939, certainly before 1914. The reasons for this current bankruptcy are well known.

As a general rule, the various countries of Western Europe have a comparable structure: they import raw materials and export manufactured products, and they suffer from the same malady. They are unable to earn the dollars that they need by selling goods in the western hemisphere. In the short term, they will not earn them any more easily by joining forces. Adding deficits together does not produce a surplus.

Two approaches to economic integration are possible: one based on free trade and the market mechanism, the other on coordination of investment and, in a wider sense, national plans. However, for the moment both seem to be ruled out. In principle, countries governed predominantly on labourite lines, such as Great Britain, Sweden and Norway, incline towards central planning; continental countries with a conservative bias, such as Belgium (although the Belgian Socialists continue to have a role in government) and Italy, look to liberalism. Supranational planning meets resistance from liberal countries and is frustrated to an even greater extent by the refusal of all countries to 'rethink' their industrial structure within a European context. The 'liberalisation' of inter-European trade seems to be making some progress, but, while currencies remain inconvertible and movements of goods subject to quantitative restrictions, we shall not advance beyond the stage of making do.

Even the sharing of the cake (i.e. the allocation of Marshall aid to the various beneficiaries) will raise increased difficulties this year: the cake is smaller and appetites greater. Eleven nations, including Italy, Greece, Norway and Great Britain, are demanding more dollars, which must come from a reduced total amount.

Economic discussions are not forbidden in the European Assembly, but they are discouraged. Should the Assembly go its own way? Would it be capable of instilling into national governments the 'European sense' which they lack? As enticing as it may be, such a prospect seems to me illusory. Economic cooperation will provide an opportunity for some elegant speeches on the virtues, either separately or in combination, of free trade and the 'international nationalisation' of key industries. It is hardly possible to see how the Strasbourg parliamentarians would achieve results in the space of a few days on subjects which national

parliamentarians have not even found the time to study (the French Assembly has never looked at the Monnet Plan) and on which top experts have been working in vain for months. Some continental delegates would not be averse to discoursing on technical subjects. The wavering faith of the British would find it hard not to succumb to verbal promises of this kind.

We are aware that military cooperation has, quite rightly, been excluded from the remit of the Assembly. Sweden, which is a member of the Assembly, intends to maintain its neutrality and has not joined the Atlantic Pact. In addition, differences between the Western powers regarding the organisation of the command structure and the various strategic concepts have been aired in public with an abandon which is more demagogic than democratic, which makes us miss the era of tight-lipped diplomats and chancelleries working in secret.

Much emphasis has been placed on limiting the prerogatives accorded to the Assembly. It does not set its own agenda, which must be approved by the Committee of Ministers. It approves recommendations by a two-thirds majority, but the Ministers, who take the decisions unanimously, are free to reject them. It is quite clear that the Assembly does not have a shred of sovereignty. But what would it do if it had any? To what will it devote its work?

Since national defence and the economy have been ruled out, what else is there? Politics and culture, fine. But will cultural questions, from respect for human rights to a European passport or a European university, be seen by the general public to have sufficient clout to confer on the Assembly a prestige worthy of its pretensions? And what specifically political questions will governments risk referring to it at a time when national passions are flaring up again? The proposal attributed to the French Government, in my opinion an unfortunate one, that the Saar be represented independently was enough to elicit an angry response from Dr Schumacher. If the Saar is in the Assembly, Germany will not join, he exclaimed. If we accept that one of the main objectives of the European movement is to facilitate reconciliation between France and Germany, this incident must arouse a certain disquiet.

What may we expect from this first session of the Assembly? In my opinion, essentially three results, of limited scope but worthwhile. Firstly, a demonstration that it is possible for parliamentarians schooled in different methods and who do not all speak both official languages fluently to work effectively together. Secondly, the adoption of a Western European consensus on Germany. (Some members will no doubt question the wisdom of continuing the 'dismantling' operations in 1949, should Mr Bevin and Mr Schuman feel inclined to do so.) Finally, on the specific subject of European economic and political unity, the Assembly might draw up some suggestions which would go beyond the stage currently reached without, however, appearing utopian. If, in three weeks, the Assembly covers a programme of this scope, establishes a reasonable procedure, probably more inspired by British than continental practice, adds some specific studies on precise subjects to debates or recommendations of principle, neither will world peace be assured nor the unity of the old continent be achieved. But at least the eighty-seven parliamentarians will have ensured that a great idea did not fall at the first fence.

Raymond Aron