

Address given by Pierre Pflimlin (Strasbourg, 28 January 1977)

Caption: At the official opening ceremony of the 'Palais de l'Europe' on 28 January 1977, following the city's donation to the European institutions of the building land required, Pierre Pflimlin, Mayor of Strasbourg, speaks on behalf of the people of Strasbourg, welcoming the new building, which has been designed to meet the requirements not only of the Council of Europe but also of the European Parliament and represents a promise of unity in the future.

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Mr President of the Republic, Your Excellencies, Presidents and Members of the European Assemblies, Presidents and Speakers of National Parliaments, Monsignor the Representative of the Holy See, Ladies and Gentlemen, the year 1949, which saw the birth of the Council of Europe was a turning-point in the history of our city. In a proposal by Ernest Bevin, the United Kingdom Foreign Secretary, immediately supported by Robert Schuman, Strasbourg was chosen as the seat of the new institution. After long being a stake and a victim in European wars, our city was selected to become in Ernest Bevin's words, "a symbol of European unity". Thus arose Strasbourg's European mission, to which its citizens are deeply devoted.

We are conscious of the duties this mission imposes on us. It was only natural that the city should provide the European institutions free of charge with the building land they needed. In addition, it took upon itself the task of erecting the building next to this one where the European Court and Commission of Human Rights sit. With the help of the French Government, air services have been introduced in recent years from Strasbourg to London, Brussels, Amsterdam and Milan, and soon there will be direct flights to Dusseldorf. We greatly hope that our air services will be further extended and improved in the near future.

The people of Strasbourg have the privilege of closely following the manifold activities of the Council of Europe. They are probably in a better position than others to gauge the importance of the results already obtained by the Organisation and appreciate the magnitude of the tasks still awaiting it in the many fields where its authority cannot be challenged by any other organisation.

After contenting itself with temporary accommodation for 28 years, the Council was badly in need of permanent premises worthy of the high mission assigned to it by its 19 member States. That need has now been met; and I congratulate the Secretary General, Mr Kahn-Ackermann, and his colleagues who have brought this difficult enterprise to a successful conclusion, as well as the Chairman of the Committee of Ministers and the President of the Parliamentary Assembly, my friend Karl Czernetz.

When the City of Strasbourg provided the land for this building, it laid down the condition that the building should be designed to meet in full the requirements not only of the Council of Europe but also of the European Parliament, which normally holds its sessions in Strasbourg. That condition has been complied with, I am glad to say; and I am particularly pleased to be able to extend greetings here to the European Parliament delegation led by President Georges Spénale, as well as to Mr Jenkins, President of the Commission of the European Communities. I hope that next year we shall be able to welcome to Strasbourg an Assembly elected by direct universal suffrage by the peoples of the European Community.

That, as we know, is also the wish of the President of the French Republic, to whom, like all who are committed to the idea of a united Europe, I am deeply grateful for having proposed this step decided on by the European Council, which will enable further progress to be made along the path marked out by the Treaty of Rome.

It must be admitted that the supporters of Europe are in need of reassurance and encouragement. In recent years they have experienced many disappointments. The temptations of scepticism and disheartenment are lying in wait for them. Some people in other places may be able to resign themselves to the great hopes of the 1950s being damped. But not the citizens of Strasbourg. From the tragic events of the past those who live on the banks of the Rhine know that the only alternative to the progressive unification of Europe is a relapse, sooner or later, into the national rivalries which were the cause of fratricidal wars and which, tomorrow, would render our continent fatally weak vis-à-vis the watching world around us.

To be sure, the building of this Palais de l'Europe was long overdue – not just for practical reasons but because its construction is an act of faith. The Palais now rises towards the Strasbourg sky – and we are happy to convey our thanks to the architect – as a tangible and irrefutable token of the resolve of the heads of State, governments and parliaments in whose hands the fate of the free peoples of Europe lies to be the builders of unity.

For the citizens of Strasbourg this building you have constructed is a building of promise – a promise of peace, security and freedom. We offer you our thanks.