

Statement by the British delegation (London, 28 March 1949)

Caption: On 28 March 1949, the British delegation participating in the negotiations of the Five on the establishment of a Council of Europe sends to its partners a preparatory note concerning the conduct and objectives of the final phase of their work.

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I won't say this is a great occasion because, as you know, we are only meeting on the humble official level and preparing the way for official decisions by our Ministers. But at least I can say that it is the beginning of a great occasion and I can at any rate welcome, in the name of the Five Powers who have been doing some pre-preparatory work, the presence among us today of representatives from Denmark, Ireland, Italy, Norway and Sweden.

2. Although you know them very well, perhaps I should just very briefly call attention to a few historical facts which are responsible for our all meeting in this room today. The idea of greater unity among European nations has been present in men's minds for quite a long period, but it is only within the last year or two that it has begun to take concrete shape. So far as my Government are concerned, it was on January 22nd, 1948, that Mr Bevin made his great speech to the House of Commons in which he put forward his general broad conception of Western Union as a whole. Subsequently, as you all know, this idea bore fruit in the conclusion of the Treaty of Brussels which was partly defensive, but partly also designed to cover economic, social and cultural matters. Meanwhile the idea of a wider unity in regard to these last matters was largely owing to the happy initiative of the French Government pursued both officially in various meetings of the Consultative Council of the Brussels Treaty, and unofficially in meetings of the European Movement. Finally it was agreed to establish in Paris a Committee composed of representatives of the Brussels Powers to study this matter and the Committee presented its report at the end of January, in time for consideration by the last meeting of the Consultative Council but one. At that meeting the Permanent Commission of the Brussels Treaty was charged with getting out a short statement of principles to which all Governments might agree, which would form the basis of discussion on a larger Conference to which the States now happily represented here would be invited. This statement of principles is before you today. I would only emphasise that it is, as I have said, a basis for discussion but we should hope that it would, in fact, serve that purpose.

3. You will see that we have tried so far to act on the principle of first things first. In other words, the Five Power Brussels nucleus was created in the first instance and we are now proposing to add five other Powers to that nucleus so as to create a greater nucleus still. In this we have so far acted on the principle of geographical propinquity, but we imagine, of course, that the Council of Europe, when formed, will include States other than those represented in this room and the exact moment at which such other States will join us is no doubt also a matter for discussion.

4. The object of the present preparatory meeting is, if possible, to agree on a plan for submission to our Ministers. It is hoped that they will be able to assemble soon after Easter. The best thing of all would be if we could agree on the actual text of some draft Instrument. But before we tackle the drafting of this we must try to arrive at agreement on matter of principle. And that calls for political decisions.

5. Once a sufficient degree of political agreement is forth-coming, we might, I suggest, establish a Legal and Drafting Committee to translate the points of principle into a legal document. If there is difficulty in reaching agreement on any particular point of principle, we might perhaps form a Sub-Committee of this preparatory meeting in order to try to settle it.

6. As regards publicity, I would suggest that this meeting of experts should not be advertised too much. Any decisions which we may arrive at will of course, be ad referendum to our Ministers on whom it will fall to take the final decisions in full knowledge of their parliamentary responsibilities and in the belief that they will be able to induce their respective parliaments to ratify the Instrument that we hope they will feel able to sign. There may, of course, be Press leaks as to what is said in this room, but I would beg you most earnestly to see that such leaks are reduced to a minimum and I suggest that we should try to cope with the Press by issuing quite full and informative, if not exactly exciting, communiqués.

7. As regards general procedure, it is our belief that the final act of the present Conference will have to contain provision for some kind of Preparatory Commission served by an Executive Secretary and the necessary staff. The function of this Preparatory Commission will be, in the interval between the signing of our Instrument and its coming into force, to do the necessary organisational work so that the first meeting of

the Council of Europe may take place at a given time and at a given place. Seeing that for obvious reasons, the period between mid-August and mid-September is the best suited for busy parliamentarians, we may perhaps have in our minds as an objective the signing of the Instrument by the beginning of May and its entry into force by the beginning of August. That, I suggest, is kind of timetable which we ought to have in our minds.

8. A word in conclusion. The Council of Europe as we conceive of it, is a machine primarily designed to bring ever closer together, those European States, who to a large extent, share a common historical background and a common way of life sometimes referred to as a civilisation. It is purposely not designed to deal with any matters relating to defence and it cannot therefore be said to be in any way directed against anybody. Nevertheless, there are certain traditions, principles and standards which are associated with our respective countries and which in the world of today are increasingly threatened. The Council of Europe will, we hope, be chiefly engaged in preserving these principles. And thus in making the voice of Europe heard in the world. It will be soon that, if this is to be achieved, there must be some means whereby we can all of us try to formulate our common principles and ideals, whether they relate to things of the spirit - and by this word I would include cultural activities, the rule of law and human rights - or whether they relate to material things, such as economic and social advancement and political co-operation. The scheme for the Council of Europe, which in the broadest outline is now laid before you for discussion and, I trust, for healthy criticism, is designed for just this purpose. I will not attempt in these brief introductory remarks, to go into its details, though I hope what the Five Powers will have an opportunity of explaining and justifying the various proposals as we go along. Here I would only add this. The body whose establishment we are suggesting, is an entirely novel type of body. It is partly - perhaps chiefly - governmental, but to a considerable extent, it is also non-governmental. Its successful functioning will hence demand not only great enthusiasm, great organisational ability and great fertility in adapting old procedures and inventing new ones, it will also demand great restraint. If we push ahead too fast, we might find that the pressures engendered by the new machine may be too great and that the Council from which we all hope so much, may actually retard the cause of European Unity rather than advance it. If on the other hand we set up a workable machine and more especially one in which the various Governments will have confidence, we may - I am sure we shall - be helping our Ministers to take a historical decision which may influence for the better the development of Europe for generations to come.