

'Parliamentary Assembly: half a century of history in two speeches' from The Europeans

Caption: Extracts from two speeches, juxtaposed by The Electronic Newsletter of the Council of Europe Parliamentary Assembly on the occasion of the 50th anniversary of the Council of Europe: the first is from a speech given by Edouard Herriot, Honorary President of the Assembly, during the first session of the Council held on 10 August 1949, and the second is from a speech given by Lord Russell Johnston, President of the Assembly, on 25 January 1999.

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1949 – 1999 : the Europe of values hits its half-century

Parliamentary Assembly: half a century of history in two speeches

The first Session

Edouard Herriot, Honorary President of the Assembly – 10 August 1949

«It is a mistake, in my view, to believe that an international *rapprochement* must have its origin in a diminution of the idea of patriotism. The loftiest sentiments supplement, rather than conflict with one another. The best citizen is one who, in the first place, shows his profound attachment to his family, and it is because of the deep devotion that he feels to his own nation that he will manifest a sincere respect for the genius of other peoples, as evolved by nature and by history.

You have present among you, dear colleagues, the very best examples of that richness of the soul which reconciles, rather than opposes (...). Your statute has instructed you to “give form to the aspirations of the peoples of Europe” and to “furnish the governments with the means of keeping constantly in touch with European public opinion”. (...)

We are not declaring war on anyone. Whatever may be alleged, our meetings have no aggressive intentions towards anybody. “All the doors – as Mr Schuman has said – are open towards the East, towards all those who today refrain from taking their place among us”.

We merely decide to associate ourselves in order to defend these two great acquisitions of human civilisation: freedom and law. Freedom, for which so many men have sacrificed themselves and which requires that, in every collective organisation, the individual shall retain the government of his own conscience and his own personal and moral individuality; and law: which, by agreed rules, sets limits to the interest and privileges of the individual. (...)

But we, who are representatives of, and to a certain extent, responsible for many human lives, are horrified to note the reappearance of certain ideologies based on the cult of force and on the rights of the mailed fist. On several occasions they have led, to an extent never known before, to massacres, torture, executions, deportations and the horror of the gas chambers. Many families in Europe mourn innumerable victims. (...)

Now you are about to start on your work. You have first to set up your organisation. The Council and the Assembly of Europe must have a permanent character. Right from the outset, you know that you are acting as individuals, not subject to any pressure. This is in line with the ideas of freedom and law. Any act of creation, even the birth of a child, contains a certain risk; any act of creation is an act of faith. The European Assembly will be what your determinations makes it ».

50 Years after

Lord Russell-Johnston, President of the Assembly – 25 January 1949

«Today in Kosova we have seen the vicious circle of ethnic hatred and violence and the helpless tragic columns of refugees. Years of peaceful opportunity provided by Ibrahim Rugova to find a solution to the conflict had been wasted and Albanian resentment found a new bitter terrorist outlet which resulted in a massive and indiscriminate Serb reprisal.

In two days' time the Assembly will debate the favourable opinion on Georgia's request for accession to the Council of Europe. We rejoice and hope that the other two countries in the Caucasus, Armenia and Azerbaijan, will find the strength to reconcile.

It demands more courage to reconcile than to make war!

I fully share his analysis that the Council of Europe is a political organisation of general competence.

If this would not be the case, one should ask what we, parliamentarians, together with forty Ministers of Foreign Affairs and their ambassadors, are doing here.

The Assembly has an essential role in the implementation of political tasks of the Council of Europe.

In all the world, this Assembly is a unique institution: it is a gathering of parliamentarians, from 40 countries, of all political persuasions, responsible, not to governments, but to our own consensual concept of what it is right to do. There is no other like it.

What has been achieved in Europe should be a model for other parts of the world. We have a global responsibility to make it work. Three of its activities are of particular importance in this respect.

Firstly, since we are, first and foremost, an organisation dedicated to the protection and enhancement of pluralism and human rights, we ought to be much more directly active where infringements are alleged, and I intend to be so.

Secondly, I think we have a potent but undeveloped capacity to mediate – or perhaps I should say pre-mediate – disputes.

Thirdly, I am a great believer in seeing things for myself! As your president, I believe that where there is trouble, I should be there. We have not only to proclaim our principles but to seek actively to implement them ».