Édouard Bonnefous' memories of the Congress of Europe in The Hague (September 1998)

Caption: In September 1998, in the Revue des Deux Mondes, Édouard Bonnefous, former French Member of Parliament and Minister, refers to the 50th anniversary of the Congress of Europe in The Hague and gives his personal account of the origins and repercussions of the Congress, held in May 1948.

Source: Revue des Deux Mondes. Septembre 1998. Paris. "Le congrès de La Haye hier et aujourd'hui (1948-1998)", auteur:Bonnefous, Édouard , p. 79-85.

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The Hague Congress, then and now (1948–1998)

by Édouard Bonnefous

During the war and the many long hours spent working for the Resistance, we dreamt of peace and we constantly wondered how best to achieve the urgently needed reconciliation. However, lasting peace in Europe could only be achieved, and could only be successful, within a union. When we entered Parliament in 1946, my junior colleagues and I decided to devote all our efforts to this vast undertaking. Prior to the convening of the Hague Congress from 7 to 10 May 1948, the European idea had already been the subject of many discussions, debates and initiatives.

Before the May 1948 Congress

On 10 March 1948, after participating in the work of the European Parliamentary Union meeting in Gstaad in September 1947 with my friend and colleague Félix Gaillard, I submitted — jointly with Paul Rivet, François de Menthon and André Noël — a resolution to the National Assembly to ask the government to propose the convening of a 'European Constituent Assembly'. This proposal was signed by some 100 MPs, including Pierre Grouès, who was subsequently better known as Abbé Pierre. It involved calling for the convening, at the earliest possible opportunity, of an assembly whose task it would be to establish the permanent institutions of a democratic European Federation. 'The need for economic and political association between the various countries of Europe is no longer debated by anyone in France,' we wrote at that time. 'The fate of the whole of Europe will depend on the success or failure, in the coming months, of the work of unification that has already begun.' The proposal was referred to the Committee on Foreign Affairs, which I then chaired. A report submitted on 23 and 24 July 1948 stated the purpose of the future Assembly:

— to draft an international declaration of human and peoples' rights;

— to coordinate agreements of association between the Western nations by studying and proposing a general plan for the economic and even political and military organisation of Europe, which would constitute a major step forward towards a union and, consequently, towards prosperity and peace;

— to coordinate customs systems and to propose, if necessary, a plan to rationalise European production and a coherent organisation of European and extra-European markets;

— to promote the harmonisation of achievements made in the social sphere and the movement of people and ideas;

— to work towards drafting a Federal Constitution of European nations.

All European prospects were already incorporated into these various texts. The report was ultimately approved by 21 votes with 6 votes against and 1 abstention.

The 1948 Hague Congress

Convened by the International Committee of the Movements for European Unity (ICMEU), this Congress was an act of solidarity by the various European movements founded after the war. It was held from 7 to 10 May 1948.

Winston Churchill, in his famous Fulton speech on the 'Iron Curtain' in March 1946, then again in his speech in Zurich in September 1946, called upon the countries of Europe to resist Soviet pressure and prepare for the future of the European continent. We must not forget the context of the Cold War, which made it essential for major steps to be taken: in February 1948 the Prague coup took place, the People's Republic of North Korea had just been proclaimed, the schism between the Soviet Union and Yugoslavia was about to become public knowledge and, in June, the Berlin Blockade would begin.

The aim was to demonstrate the existence of a wave of public opinion in support of European unity, to discuss problems posed by the attainment of such unity and to propose practical steps to the governments that would help achieve this goal. Some 800 dignitaries attended the Hague Congress: statesmen, MPs, clergymen of all faiths, industrialists, trade union leaders, economists, academics, writers, scholars, artists, etc. Not since the golden age of the League of Nations had there been such a gathering of so many eminent Europeans, most of whom had travelled to The Hague in a personal capacity. There were 12 former Prime Ministers, 60 Ministers and 200 MPs. Among those present were Winston Churchill, Harold Macmillan, Paul Ramadier, Paul Reynaud, Jacques Chaban-Delmas, Pierre Bourdan, François Mitterrand, Bertrand Russell, Ignazio Silone, Altiero Spinelli, Konrad Adenauer and Walter Hallstein, and many other individuals who were already well known, but also lesser-known figures who would later become famous.

The first session of the Congress was held in the presence of Princess Juliana of the Netherlands — Queen Wilhelmina was to announce her abdication on 12 May and Princess Juliana was to take the oath on 6 September. The proceedings began with a rousing speech by Winston Churchill and took place within three Committees: a Political Committee chaired by Paul Ramadier (with René Courtin and Ronald W. G. Mackay as rapporteurs), an Economic and Social Committee chaired by Paul van Zeeland (with Daniel Serruys and Lord Layton as rapporteurs) and a Cultural Committee led by Salvador de Madariaga with Denis de Rougemont as rapporteur. Each Committee drew up a Final Resolution, and a Message to Europeans was adopted by acclamation.

‘Europe is threatened, Europe is divided, and the greatest danger comes from her divisions. […] Europe marches towards her end. The hour has come to take action commensurate with the danger. We desire a United Europe, throughout whose area the free movement of persons, ideas and goods is restored. We desire a Charter of Human Rights guaranteeing liberty of thought, assembly and expression as well as the right to form a political opposition. We desire a Court of Justice with adequate sanctions for the implementation of this Charter. We desire a European Assembly where the live forces of all our nations shall be represented. And [we] pledge ourselves in our homes and in public, in our political and religious life, in our professional and trade union circles, to give our fullest support to all persons and governments working for this lofty cause, which offers the last chance of peace and the one promise of a great future for this generation and those that will succeed it.’

Regrettably, the Hague Congress did not achieve all the goals that had been set by the most ardent supporters of European unity. Paul Reynaud and I had proposed the immediate convening of a European Parliament elected by universal suffrage on the basis of one representative per million inhabitants. The vast majority of delegates rejected this proposal. The discussions essentially gave rise to conflict between unionists and federalists. The unionists, who were rallied around the British, hoped to achieve European union through the establishment of multilateral agreements, whilst the federalists, led by most of the French, called for the establishment of an effective transfer of national sovereignty to federal executive bodies. In addition, those states with a small population were afraid of being sidelined. Paul Ramadier himself was opposed to our proposal.

As a result of all of these reservations, mention was made in the Final Resolution of a European Deliberative Assembly, which foreshadowed the unionists’ subsequent resistance.

Given the retrospective importance of the decisions that were taken, it is worth reiterating the main thrust of the Political Resolution:

1. The time has come when the European nations must transfer and merge some portion of their sovereign rights.

2. The integration of Germany in a United or Federated Europe alone provides a solution to both the economic and political aspects of the German problem.

3. A European Deliberative Assembly consisting of representatives appointed by the Parliaments must be

convened as a matter of real urgency. Its tasks will consist in discussing all issues of common interest and advising upon practical measures designed progressively to bring about the necessary economic and political union of Europe.

4. A Charter of Human Rights will be drafted and must be adopted by all nations wishing to participate in the European Union.

5. A Court of Justice will be established with adequate sanctions for the implementation of this Charter.

6. The establishment of a united Europe will not be considered as an end goal but rather as a step towards the future development of world unity.

The Hague Congress nevertheless led to undeniable successes. It showed that there was a willingness to work together. It was an outstanding forum of European ideas. In practical terms, it paved the way for the establishment of the European Movement which was founded on 25 October 1948 in Brussels with Winston Churchill, Léon Blum — later replaced by Robert Schuman — and Paul-Henri Spaak elected as honorary presidents.

The Congress held in Brussels in February 1949 and those held that same year in Westminster in April and in Lausanne in December were the main stages of a European Movement that sought to speed up the process of awareness. Despite reservations felt both in the European states and abroad, the Council of Europe was established in May 1949 and held its first meeting in August of that year.

Fifty years later: the May 1998 Hague Congress

In May 1998, the European Movement was therefore eager to celebrate the 50th anniversary of this founding event in The Hague. I say founding event, for its consequences are still being felt. Indeed, we had to wait 25 years for universal suffrage to be adopted to appoint the representatives of Europe's citizens to the Parliament in Strasbourg. In the meantime, however, economic Europe had been established with the European Coal and Steel Community, Euratom, the Common Market and European structures and legislation. In the future, the euro will provide the EU with an effective weapon. The European Movement — now chaired by the former Portuguese Prime Minister Mario Soares, a mark of Europe's first enlargement from the original six Member States — still acts as a stimulus and a catalyst; it has recently emphasised strongly that the enlargement of the Union and the transition to the single currency will not take the place of discussions on the objectives and structures of the European Union.

Fifty years later, the European Movement therefore took the initiative to re-enact the events of May 1948 at the same location. On 8 May, a major brainstorming session was held on the future of European society in the presence of thousands of delegates, including many young people. The following day, we celebrated the 1948 Congress in the presence of Queen Beatrix of the Netherlands. Then, a commemorative plaque was inaugurated in the historic Hall of Knights, the *Ridderzaal*. The former President of the European Commission, Jacques Delors, and the former French President, Valéry Giscard d'Estaing, attended these events. Regrettably, very few 1948 Congress participants were able to attend: along with two foreign colleagues, I was the only MP present from 1948. During this commemoration, I recalled the long hours spent, 50 years earlier, as a member of the Political Committee alongside Paul Reynaud, Pierre-Olivier Lapie, Félix Gaillard and Paul Ramadier; our lunches with Jacques Rueff on the square by the *Ridderzaal* and our visits to the museums during the rare moments when our work allowed it; finally, I recalled the brilliant speech given by Churchill at the opening of the Congress in this hall, a speech which included sentiments that Valéry Giscard d'Estaing would echo 50 years later. However, nostalgia does not befit an event that was entitled 'Working together to build Europe of the 21st century' and whose young organisers were driven by the same conviction in 1998 that we felt in 1948.

The Europe that has been built is, indeed, very different from the one that we imagined. From six Member States, we increased to 12 and then to 15. In the future there will be many more of us. This is evidence of a Europe now at peace and on the path to reunification. This Europe also differs from our grand design in that

it started with economic integration and is only gradually moving towards political integration. It is of little consequence, for, after half a century, the Europe of minds and of peoples is winning.