

'Congress of Europe goes warily' from The Manchester Guardian (10 May 1948)

Caption: On 10 May 1948, the British daily newspaper The Manchester Guardian reports on the heated debates that took place and the resolution which was finally adopted during the night at the end of the final working session of the Political Committee at the Congress of Europe in The Hague.

Source: The Manchester Guardian. 10.05.1948, No 31 691. Manchester.

Copyright: (c) GUARDIAN - OBSERVER

URL: http://www.cvce.eu/obj/congress_of_europe_goes_warily_from_the_manchester_guardian_10_may_1948-en-cc2b7cfd-f4a5-4cc3-a471-e83815824331.html

Publication date: 20/09/2012

Congress of Europe goes warily

Against Elected Parliament

Vote for Assembly chosen by governments

from our special correspondent

THE HAGUE, MAY 9

The members of the Political Commission of the Congress of Europe left the Ridderzaal at 3.15 this morning and staggered wearily to their hotels. They had been debating since 10 o'clock on Saturday morning, and in the end they approved, with some additions and only minor alterations, nine of the ten parts of the resolution that had been drafted by the sub-committee.

This resolution declares that the time has come when the European nations must transfer and merge some portion of their sovereign rights. It demands, "as a matter of extreme urgency," that a European Assembly, chosen by the Parliaments of the nations taking part, should be convened to advise upon immediate practical measures designed progressively to bring about the necessary economic and political union of Europe, to examine the constitutional implications of such a union or federation, and to prepare the necessary plan.

This is the not too precise decision which Mr. Churchill asked for in his opening speech. The only part of the resolution yet to be considered is one saying that the only ultimate solution of the economic and political problems of Germany is its integration in a federated Europe. With luck this may be passed before midnight to-night.

Vagueness on federation

The resolution sometimes speaks of "federation," sometimes of "union," and twice of "union or federation." This vagueness is deliberate. About one-third of the delegates are federalists and they usually – but not always – use the word "federation" in its exact sense. They mean that certain powers should be surrendered to a central Government for all time and that there could be no withdrawal. Non-federalists here are using the word loosely to mean a league of States with some common institution. Similarly, when they talk about merging some portion of a nation's sovereign rights they do not visualize a complete loss of sovereignty over that portion. In fact, one discovers in conversation with delegates that some of them have not thought out the implications properly, and the federalists here have not tried seriously to argue the case for federal as against non-federal solution. To have done so would have been to split the congress hopelessly.

The cultural commission has been talking about a definition of the word "democracy," which means different things to different people, but it did not define "federalism." That would have been too dangerous, and the word has been as loosely used here as we used "democracy" during the early conferences between the Great Powers of the East and West.

An odd gathering

The length of debate and the chaos of yesterday's meeting may have given an impression of hopeless disunity. That would be false. The chaos was mostly administrative and procedural. When it came to the vote few of the important amendments received substantial support.

The session yesterday morning was, however, deplorable. Several hundred delegates and observers gathered in the Floral Hall of the Botanical Gardens and sat at small tables arranged as though for a smoking concert. The chairman, M. Ramadier, and his committee had a platform too low to give them command of the meeting. The speakers were on the floor level and could not be seen from the back. Places had not been marked out, and the delegations were split up according to the time delegates arrived. There were no tellers appointed and there was no steering committee. Waiters clattered about with cups of coffee, young men

distributed packets of cigarettes, and almost half the delegates were strolling about and talking during both speeches and translations. Somebody had tiptoed into the tulips at the side of the platform and a workman slowly mopped up the pools. If one had seen “Monsewer” Eddie Gray quietly juggling in one corner it would not have seemed too incongruous.

M. Ramadier appealed for order with the old French politeness, but it was not until he began to roar “Sit down” instead of “Pray be seated” that the conference gave him anything like order. Then amendment after amendment began pouring on, and the chaos was increasing until Mr. R. G. Mackay suggested the appointment of a steering committee to consolidate and weed out all these proposals.

But this, too, led during the afternoon to some disturbance. The committee, the delegates considered, behaved just a little too smoothly. It seemed to introduce an amendment of its own which suggested that the European nations should not merge some parts of their sovereignty but must “jointly exercise some parts of their sovereign rights.” Miss Josephy, a leading federalist, declared that this was taking all the “guts” out of the resolution.

When the vote was put it was obvious that the delegates did not know quite for what they were voting. The amendment polled 60 votes for and 60 against, and when the resolution was put later hardly anybody was discovered to be in opposition to it. There had been no continuation of the debate between the vote on the amendment and the vote on the resolution, but a great many people had changed their minds on this rather vital point within a few minutes. Indeed, some of the delegates said afterwards that they saw no real difference between resolution and amendment.

M. Reynaud's alternative

There were more protests made now about the steering committee, and some of the French delegation were particularly annoyed when they learned that apparently M. Paul Reynaud's amendment had not been accepted for discussion. The committee was urged to think again and get matters straightened out for the evening session.

M. Reynaud had made one of the more impressive speeches. He is now well over seventy, but he is still the trim, lively little man that he was eight years ago when it looked as though he would rally France. He said that the resolution proposing an assembly nominated by Parliament would be merely a club of self-appointed deputies, the authorities saying: “Let the people keep silent. We will settle these things.” At these meetings the Ministers would be devotees of national interest. He voiced a few doubts about prospects of continuing American aid and then proposed his amendment that a European Parliament should be elected by universal suffrage, with one delegate to every 1,000,000 inhabitants.

Mr. Harold Macmillan made a suave, bland Tory speech of which the keynote was: “Let us not be led into making proposals that are not practical.” This did not seem to make much impression on an audience of this character. When the debate was continued in the evening in the Ridderzaal it reached a much higher level, and there were some good speeches for and against M. Reynaud's proposals.

Some time after midnight, when everybody was utterly fatigued, Mr. Mackay came to the rafters and made a rather abusive speech. He thought it was a silly resolution “which makes fools of this conference and will make the congress the laughing-stock of Europe,” and he particularly cast scorn on M. Reynaud's suggestion that it should all be done within a year. When the translator came to the ruder part of Mr. Mackay's speech M. Ramadier stopped him and deplored the use of such language. M. Reynaud gracefully and neatly pricked Mr. Mackay by saying that one of the drawbacks of Parliamentary experience was the custom of using adjectives rather freely.

Not all the French delegation supports M. Reynaud—in fact, only about a dozen people voted for his amendment altogether,—but Mr. Mackay's Australian bluntness was regretted, and some people are pointing out that in a book which he wrote a short time ago Mr. Mackay himself suggested extremely optimistic time limits on a proposal to set up a European Parliament.

Economic difficulties

The economic commission got itself into even bigger difficulties than the political commission, for there is a cleavage between Socialists and non-Socialists, but it is hoping to be able to dissolve the difficulties tonight. The cultural commission finished about midnight and finally passed its resolution. To-morrow there will be a plenary session of the congress. A little uneasiness has been caused by a decision to admit the Europeans invited as observers as delegates of equal status. These include exiled Spaniards and representatives from Eastern Europe.