

'Mr. Churchill's day at The Hague' from The Manchester Guardian (8 May 1948)

Caption: On 8 May 1948, referring to the implications of the Congress of Europe in The Hague, the British daily newspaper The Manchester Guardian reports on the highlights of the address delivered the previous day by the former British Prime Minister, Winston Churchill, at the opening of the Congress.

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Mr. Churchill's day at The Hague

Congress of Europe opens

Visions of the spirit and form of a united continent

The Congress of Europe opened here in the Knights' Hall this afternoon, and it was, of course, Mr. Winston Churchill's day. The Dutch people gathered in the old courtyard before the Ridderzaal, and Mr. Churchill gave them his old V sign, although the occasion was hardly appropriate. In fact, it was hardly ceremonial at all. There were a few flags, a few banks of flowers, a patterned carpet leading up the short flight of steps to the hall, and the police band playing marches. But that was all.

Most of the delegates had taken their places when Mr. Churchill arrived. The Ridderzaal is an historic place which has had an impressive part in Dutch history since the thirteenth century, and though the present hall was rebuilt only forty-four years ago it was done in the original style.

Delegates sit facing a dais over which is a great canopy in crimson-and-gold velvet. Floodlights cast the brilliance of the sun over the whole interior and light up the tapestry walls and the great timbers on the roof. On the dais one could see Princess Juliana, in a short off-white fur coat and red velvet hat, and Prince Bernhard, looking for all the world like a younger Sir Stafford Cripps. Just behind them was M. Ramadier with his very French goatee. In the body of the hall one could pick out from the tribune to the press few familiar figures.

There was Mr. Eden, however, obviously enjoying his return to international life but outmatched for once in elegance by Count Coudenhove-Kalergi. Mr. Churchill had chosen to wear a frock coat such as is still worn by Continental statesmen, but has surely not been seen at Westminster since a Liberal Government was in power.

The architect

The proceedings opened with a speech of welcome made by the Burgomaster in excellent French, and then Senator Kerstens, who was a Minister of the Dutch Government in London during the war and now edits a newspaper here, opened the congress.

"To no single man in Europe," he said of Mr. Churchill, "do we owe so much as to him in both the wider and in the narrower frame of this conference." Senator Kerstens had to pause for 45 seconds until the applause died away. "But for him there would now not be a Congress of Europe in the same hall where, eight years ago, Seyss-Inquart publicly took office as the highest representative in Holland or the man who had constituted himself the Führer of Europe."

He saw this conference as the germination of the seed that Mr. Churchill had dropped eight years ago when, as Prime Minister, he offered to the people of France common citizenship with the British.

Turning to Mr. Churchill the Senator said: "Above the considerations of party politics we felt obliged to offer you the honorary chairmanship of this congress." The applause broke out again and now the whole congress, including the Prince and Princess were on their feet. Mr. Churchill was deeply moved. For a few minutes when he started his speech he did not find the full robustness of his voice, and for a time there was little applause. There are occasions when Mr. Churchill sounds less like a statesman than a great preacher, and to-day was one of them.

Welcome to Germans

The chief topic of conversation afterwards was his reference to the Germans in which he said:

"Some time ago I stated that it was the proud mission of the victor nations to take the Germans by the hand

and lead them back into the European family, and I rejoice that some of the most eminent and powerful Frenchmen have spoken in this sense. To rebuild Europe from its ruin and make its light shine forth again upon the world, we must first of all conquer ourselves. Europe requires all that Frenchmen, all that Germans, all that every one of us can give. I therefore welcome here the German delegation who we have invited into our midst."

Again he was stopped by applause, and it lasted for some seconds. It was not over vigorous, and it was not universal, but it was much more than polite.

But surely the most interesting part of Mr. Churchill to-day was on the need for peace. The Communists have called this a conference of warmongers, and even some of the more extreme federalists here believed that Mr. Churchill, looking round for alliances and a power block, and knowing how unpopular these realistic words were, drew up the same plan in the universally acceptable terms of "union" and "federation."

Nobody who heard him to-day could doubt his deep sincerity when he said : "I have the feeling that after the second thirty years war through which we have just passed, mankind needs and seeks a period of rest," and then went on to talk of the aspirations of the people in the humble homes of Europe.

Russia

The speech was, of course, resolutely anti-Communist, but in his reference to the Soviet Union Mr. Churchill was quite restrained. He told how he had hoped to see three great groups forming the massive pillars of the world organisation, one of Europe and the Commonwealth, one of the vast Soviet Union, and one of the Western hemisphere. These three great groups would quietly settle their differences and difficulties with one another. The Western Hemisphere was already a unit and here at the Hague they were helping their Government to form a new Europe.

"But we are all grieved and perplexed and imperilled by the discordant attitude and policy of the third great and equal partner, without whose active aid world organisation cannot function nor the shadow of war be lifted from the hearts and minds of man or nations."

Mr. Churchill is hardly regarded as a federalist by some of the people here. It is true that this afternoon he talked about progressively effacing frontiers and barriers and about mutual economic aid and joint military defence being accompanied by a closer political unity. He almost faced the problem that this might mean some sacrifice of national sovereignty, but it is hard to believe that he would give up for all time any part of British sovereignty, which is surely what federation means. Mr. Churchill warned the congress how unwise it would be to be drawn into "laboured attempts to draw the rigid structures of constitutions"; that was a later stage and one in which the leadership must be taken by the ruling Governments. It was not for the delegates to confront one another with sharply cut formulae or detailed arrangements.

A real federalist

After Mr. Churchill's triumph there were half a dozen speakers who included M. Ramadier of France, Count Coudenhove-Kalergi, Count Carandini, who spoke well about Italy's economic difficulties, and Mr. Gafencu, former Rumanian Foreign Minister now in exile who is here, like other people from Eastern Europe, as an observer and not as a delegate. A real federalist speech was made by Dr. H. Brugmans of the Union of European Federalists.

"Technical re-equipment," he said, "pooling of resources, division of labour among people, will all be in vain so long as national divisions persist. Let us first solve the vital question, which is a federation of Europe. To-day we are being asked, what do we want more than this co-operation by Governments? What more do we want? More than treaties which can always be cancelled, more than consultative committees, which are always likely to bog down, we want the creation of federal European institutions with full powers capable of bringing into existence a new league of free peoples."

The conflict between the federalists and the mere uniters will, of course, be seen more clearly when the commissions start to-morrow and try to frame resolutions for the final plenary session which will be held on Monday.

There have been big changes, apparently, in the lists of delegates from most other countries as well as Britain. The British delegation is reported to contain 27 Labour members of Parliament. One of the absentees is Mr. R. Crossman who, it is said here, found at the last minute an engagement which kept him away. Mr. Boothby, who was eagerly looking forward to the congress, has had to go to Scotland, where his mother is seriously ill. The French have an exceedingly strong delegation, which includes M. Paul Reynaud and a last-minute and rather unexpected arrival, M. Daladier.