

'The Congress of Europe' from The Manchester Guardian (17 May 1948)

Caption: On 17 May 1948, the independent British MP, Arthur Salter, who attended the Congress of Europe in The Hague as a member of the Economic and Social Committee, gives a positive assessment of the Congress but emphasises that practical steps still need to be taken.

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The Congress of Europe

Some Reflections

By the Rt. Hon. Sir Arthur Salter, M.P.

I went to the Hague primarily because, like the other delegates. I am deeply convinced of the necessity of closer union between the free countries of Europe, for both defensive and economic reasons. But I had also a kind of professional interest in seeing how a congress of this particular type, meeting for only four days and composed of delegates from many kinds of organizations in many countries, could be organized and find a way to express itself collectively on so wide a range of technical subjects. I have long regarded it as axiomatic that, with a few well-defined exceptions, nothing ever comes out of a large conference at the end that is not put into it at the beginning—in the form of a tentative agreement by official experts from the leading countries who have met beforehand.

Organisation

The Naval Conference at Washington in 1921 was able indeed to come to important decisions not previously arranged. But in that case the problem was limited in range and could be reduced to a few simple though very important issues. The recent Trade Conferences at Geneva and Havana were able to negotiate complicated and technical agreements. But months, but days, were then available, and, complicated as were the questions involved, they were restricted to commercial policy and were assisted by officials who had long been in contact with each other on the same or similar questions. Usually when results have been reached there has first been long and careful work by the expert officials of the most influential countries. The function of the conference itself has then been to endorse their work, to secure its acceptance by other countries ready to be influenced by those with the greatest power and responsibility, to secure publicity and the support of public opinion, and to arrange suitable methods for implementation, with the aid, for example, of such a permanent machinery as was provided at Geneva by the League of Nations.

This Congress was, however, of a very different kind; the same procedure was not applicable and similar results could not be expected. The range of subjects involved was immensely wider than that of any official conference—covering the main political and economic framework of Europe. It was not Governmental, and the delegates had therefore more freedom and less authority. Only a few days were available. While there had been some careful international preparation, not only as to material arrangements but on policy, this could not in the nature of the case serve to control the Congress. The many unofficial movements which combined to promote this Congress could not possibly be bound in the same way as Governments by the work previously done.

I did not see how, in these circumstances, a body of some 800 delegates could reach agreement on anything but general objectives, or draft a collective document expressing it. In fact the agreed resolutions passed have more substance in them than I should have thought possible in the circumstances. For this the credit is due to a handful of influential delegates who worked with skill and superhuman industry. Nevertheless, those who unreasonably expected a precise, unambiguous, and detailed programme of action will necessarily be disappointed. And those who attempt to measure the success of the Congress by the texts of the resolutions will do it a great injustice.

The main purpose of the Congress was to ascertain and to demonstrate the depth and range of the desire and determination of the free peoples of Western Europe to achieve closer union, political, economic, and cultural; and thus to give a strong impetus to the permanent groups and organisations working to this end. In this main purpose the success was striking. There has perhaps never been a conference equal to this one in the range and personal eminence of its delegates. There were some 20 ex-Prime Ministers, a greater number of ex-Foreign Ministers and Finance Ministers, and others of corresponding eminence in literature, the arts, science, religion, in economics, industry, commerce, and workers' organisations. Their presence, and obvious agreement in main purpose, was a profoundly impressive demonstration.

The two main differences which found expression and were not of course resolved turned upon federalism and the relation of any European Union to Socialism and workers' organisations. An ardent and considerable group wanted federalism, complete and at once; others an intermediate form of union, either temporarily or immediately. As to the second subject of contention, the British Labour party's discouragement of Labour member's attendance and the attempt of Mr. Dalton and others to make Western Union a Western Socialist union had some effect; but it was chiefly that of making those responsible look pretty and foolish. The Labour members, though reduced in number, were still over twenty—and those that dropped out were naturally not the strongest or the best; and it was obvious that, as most of the countries of Western Europe had deliberately chosen non-Socialist Governments, the only possible basis of union must be agreement on a free Parliamentary system and not on Socialism. The extreme Left attitude was in fact mainly expressed by a small handful of French syndicalists who wanted "workers control."

These differences, while giving life and reality to the discussions, did not impair the significance of the Congress as a great demonstration of the determination of the peoples of Western Europe to achieve closer union.

Next steps

What next? I suggest there may be something like the following development. The movements which combined to sponsor the Congress will doubtless continue their work, separately and in co-operation. Most important, I believe, will be the influence on the respective Governments of the private members of the different Parliaments (of whom about 200 were at the Congress) and of the groups which they represented. In more than one country they are nearly strong enough already to exercise a compelling pressure on the Executives. A European Assembly nominated by the Parliaments, without executive power, will perhaps be the first stage. Nomination may then be replaced by direct election, and the countries of Western Europe are nearly enough homogeneous to make a universal and equal suffrage suitable. Such an Assembly may then, under the pressure of the Parliament groups, become a constituent body for a new political authority of a federal character. Any such federal body might then be allotted defined powers, capable of gradual extension but comprising from the first a responsibility for military organisation. Meantime the "interstate" organisations set up by the Brussels and Paris conferences will continue with such work as may not for the time have been transferred to the growing "federal" authority.

The difficulties and the problems—including, of course, the relations of the United Kingdom to the rest of the Commonwealth, and of the Commonwealth as a whole to the United States and other countries—are obvious and serious. But they are not insuperable, and the impetus to closer political as well as economic union is powerful and beyond doubt, and has been greatly strengthened by the Congress.