

'Sixteen or Six?' from The New Statesman and Nation (4 September 1948)

Caption: On 4 September 1948, the London weekly magazine The New Statesman and Nation expresses its bewilderment at the French proposal for the establishment of a European Assembly consisting of all the Member States of the Organisation for European Economic Cooperation (OEEC) and calls, instead, for the establishment of an Assembly comprising the five countries signatory to the Treaty of Brussels (the United Kingdom, Belgium, France, Luxembourg and the Netherlands), to which would be added West Germany.

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Sixteen or Six?

It is a measure of Mr. Churchill's tactical skill that the latest declaration of the Government's attitude to Western Union should have been given in an exchange of letters between himself and Mr. Attlee. Ever since his fall from office in 1945, Mr. Churchill has been singularly successful in giving the impression to the outside world that he remains, if not the architect, at least the presiding genius of British foreign policy. He clearly hopes to score again. While Mr. Attlee tartly suggests that he is too busy to find time for such "frills," Mr. Churchill supports the French proposal for an Assembly of the Sixteen Nations in the evident anticipation that, under the pressure of American public opinion, and of sheer necessity, Britain will be driven willy-nilly along the road which he has pointed out.

It would, however, be a grave misfortune if the French proposal were disregarded by a Labour Cabinet merely because it was sponsored by Mr. Churchill at the Hague. What is needed at this moment is an objective appraisal of its merits.

Looking back over the road we have travelled since Mr. Marshall's Harvard speech, we can observe two quite separate movements towards Western integration which are often confused with one another. The one concerns Marshall Aid and has nothing directly to do with the Western Union; the other may be the nucleus of an increasingly independent federation capable of preventing the clash between Russia and America. In the first place, there is the O.E.E.C. in Paris which is seeking, under the stimulus of E.R.P. and the pressure of Mr. Harriman, to work out for the Sixteen Nations a four-year plan of recovery. But these Sixteen Nations are a haphazard lot. They form neither a political nor an economic unit. On the one hand, they include Turkey and Greece, geographically remote and neither of them fit to be called democracies. On the other hand, we find among them countries like Sweden, Switzerland and Eire which show no inclination to participate in any close political union. What links the Sixteen together is that they have all accepted Marshall Aid and with it the Truman Doctrine.

Mr. Attlee can therefore reasonably argue that an Assembly of the Sixteen Nations could not possibly lead to any real political federation. Geographical contiguity, political affinity and a common interest in pooled defence are three of the prerequisites for political union. The Sixteen Nations possess none of them. They could develop into an Anti-Communism bloc—which is what Mr. Churchill wants—but never into a real European Union.

At the other end of the scale is the small cohesive group formed by the five signatories of the Brussels Pact. Britain, France and Benelux do at least satisfy the three prerequisites. They are contiguous—if we assume that atom warfare has destroyed the barriers of the Channel; their defence requirements are intimately interrelated, and they share the Western belief in individual freedom, though with very different political institutions and traditions. An Assembly, limited to these five, might be a useful sounding board for the functional integration which Mr. Bevin is convinced is the sound approach to Western federation.

But unfortunately this inner nucleus excludes one essential element, the Germans. A Western Union, from which the *Länder* of Western Germany are omitted, is as absurd as one which includes Turkey. In a world dominated by the Russian-American conflict, the only way in which we can reduce the risks of war is to accept the Russian control of Eastern Germany—and to transform Western Germany from what it is now, an American colony, into a member of Western Union.

When the French Government, therefore, proposes that we should rapidly create a "16 nations" Assembly, our answer should be not a huffy negative, but a reasoned argument in favour of a "6 nations" Assembly, including Western Germany.

What response would such a British proposal meet with in France? The French democratic parties, in particular the Socialists, now realise that there is no future for French political parliamentary democracy within the confines of the nation State. They are desperately looking for any way of escape from the collapse which looms threateningly before them. Dissolution of Parliament was the only democratic method of solving the present crisis. It was opposed successfully by the Socialists—and the Communists connived at

this intrigue—because both parties feared that de Gaulle would win the elections. Not even the Weimar Republic betrayed its bankruptcy so openly and thereby gave such powerful justification to those who favour dictatorship.

In such conditions it is only too easy for British politicians to ask rhetorically: "Can you expect us to take the proposals of such a Government seriously? Can you ask Britain to hurry forward plans for political union with a country which any day now may collapse into civil war or surrender to dictatorship?" Anyone satisfied with this sort of argument blinds himself to the fact of our own involvement in the fate of France. Is it not partly because we have failed to create the new Western European framework that France is toppling into disaster? Are we once again, as in 1940, to make the offer of union when it can only be an empty gesture of regret?

What is vital is that we should not sit complacently on these islands talking—oh so sensibly!—about the virtues of functional integration, while across the Channel French democracy is gasping for life. Neither Western Europe nor Britain can ever again be saved by letting France collapse and fighting a lone Battle of Britain. If Mr. Bevin meant what he said last January about Western Union, he must set the pace of advance, not by what we find temperamentally convenient, but by the needs of the hour. It is the feeling that he is unwilling even to consider such a change of tempo which has aroused the bitter complaints in America and Europe about "British stalling."

What is at stake is not the merits of the particular French proposal—they are very few—but whether Britain will respond to the desperation of which it is the expression. Frenchmen cannot solve their own crisis. Can we really write off France because they have frankly admitted it? Our task is clear enough. We should make it clear that any Assembly based on the Sixteen Nations is sheer waste of effort, but that on the other hand the Brussels Treaty can be made the nucleus of a real Western Union by including the *Länder* of Western Germany. If the other signatories agree to this principle, we should propose the building up of a permanent secretariat at Brussels for a standing conference of Prime Ministers, and the immediate beginning of discussions on the political constitution of a small and compact Union of Western Europe in which Germans and Frenchmen can begin to grow into fellow Europeans.