

'The Consultative Assembly at work' from The New Statesman and Nation (12 August 1949)

Caption: On 12 August 1949, the correspondent for the British weekly magazine The New Statesman and Nation describes the numerous debates surrounding the appointment of the first Vice- President of the Consultative Assembly of the Council of Europe and speculates on the future activities of this Parliamentary Assembly.

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The consultative assembly at work

Churchill, raising a point of order at Strasbourg, spoke of "... the forces that have called this Assembly into being." No doubt he was thinking chiefly of the mysterious and indefinable impulses of history which, in his view, have driven the States of Europe towards unity. But the European Movement itself could not have been far from his mind—the European Movement that can claim to be the only pressure-group in the world with a flag. Green and white, it hangs in every street with almost the same incidence as the European Movement's own managers, lobbyists, secretaries and hangers-on in the *coulisses* of the Assembly.

But though most delegates do not want the Consultative Assembly to become an extension of the European Movement, the Movement, enlarged by Churchill's prestige, has members in each national delegation, and is able to bring powerful influence to bear on any matter considered by the Assembly. This was particularly impressive during the election of the vice-presidents. The British Socialists, with Dutch support, put forward the name of William Whiteley, the Labour Chief Whip, for one of the four vacancies. Since Whiteley is among the fairest and most reasonable of men, the nomination might have been expected to commend itself to all the British delegation—or as the Tories prefer to call themselves, the British representatives. Instead, Ronald Ross, supported by Churchill, challenged it on the grounds that it wasn't fitting for a Minister to have a vice-presidential chair. Since Whiteley, like any other delegate, had full right of nomination, Herriot, then acting President, rejected Ross's point of order. In the event, Lord Layton, proposed by the Tories and sustained by his supporters among European Movement members, was elected, although a solid British vote would have given Whiteley an easy majority. The fissure in the British delegation was deliberately and ostentatiously made by the Tories, who believe that, whoever may have an electoral majority at Westminster, it is they, with their European associates, who determine the majority at Strasbourg. Churchill's attitude to the Socialists began, as a Frenchman put it, with cordial indifference and continued with cordial hostility.

The European Socialists, about thirty-five in all, supported Whiteley's nomination. The previous evening, some French Socialists had suggested that the Socialist Parties should combine to form a European Parliamentary group which could act in concert. The British Socialists turned down the proposal. They felt that there might be national considerations which would override an abstract fraternity; nor could they align themselves with the anti-Catholic attitude of some Continental Socialists. But they did agree to enter into general consultations from time to time on fundamental matters affecting policy.

One practical difficulty of Socialist co-operation had lain in the seating arrangements at the Assembly. Sitting in alphabetical order, members are unable to engage in the whisper, the hiss and the note-passing which are the usual means of parliamentary consultation between individuals and parties. Both Churchill and Morrison spend a lot of time strolling across the Chamber to consult, the one Macmillan, the other Dalton. The Assembly has the air, provisionally, of an Assembly of Independents. But it is a deceptive air. The huddles in the corridors and the dinners in the villas replace for the present the familiar party aggregations in national parliaments. Before long, there may well be an informal reshuffling of Members which will make them neighbours by belief rather than by alphabetical accident.

The Assembly has been fortunate in its early unanimity about its first President. M. Spaak is a firm Chairman, and declares himself the servant of the Chamber with the same sincerity as the Speaker of the House of Commons. In many ways, however, his task is more like that of the Speaker in the days of Charles I. That is to say, he will have to protect and assert the rights of the Consultative Assembly in ever increasing measure against the prerogative of the Committee of Ministers.

The Assembly will want to extend its powers; the Committee will want to contain them. In Churchill, Spaak has an urgent commoner who has already impressed on him the wish of the Assembly to make its own decisions on its agenda without leave of the Committee of Ministers.

The provisional agenda authorised by the Committee covers economics, social security and culture, and admits other kindred subjects. It seems likely that delegates will want to talk about wider subjects such as the admission of Germany. Under present arrangements, the entry of new States requires the approval of the

Committee of Ministers. Yet, in the Assembly's confident and energetic mood, the representatives at Strasbourg seem likely to persist in the demand that they should have the right to determine absolutely the Assembly's composition.

The question remains; what is the Assembly going to do? For several days, the Committee of Ministers hesitated as to whether to admit into the agenda any general discussion on the objects of the Assembly. The Ministers preferred to confine the Assembly to the lower, and as they claimed, more practical plane of European passports and tunnels. But the representatives, deeply concerned with the question of organising Europe's unity, have insisted on a discussion of the major theme.

At the moment, there appear to be three main parties of opinion in the Assembly—the federalists, the functionalists and the mystics. The federalists are to be found in all political parties; the mystics chiefly in the conservative parties. The functionalists are represented in the Committee of Ministers and the Foreign Offices who dislike the intrusion of the Assembly upon their sovereignty. But there are many functionalists, particularly among the Northern representatives, who while believing in the need for the eventual federation of Europe, want to approach it pragmatically by enlarging the working arrangements between Europe's states.

The mystics, fortunately few, are unhelpful and dangerous. Befuddled by the steam of their own rhetoric, they see in European unity no more than a reaction of conservative forces against Social Democracy. With tears in their eyes they say "Europe"; and in their hearts is a lament for privilege. They speak of freedom, and mean *laissez-faire*; of stability, and mean Conservatism.

Yet even the mystics are divided on the question of Germany. The French suspicion of Germany is deep-rooted and bitter, as Herriot's opening speech showed. As soon as a Frenchman begins a reference to Germany with the words, "We esteem the Germany of Goethe," we can expect the kick to come in the second half of the sentence. In Herriot's case, it came with a reference to the concentration camps and torture chambers of Nazi Germany. In fact, Churchill's enthusiasm for the early admission of Germany to the Assembly has found little echo, although so far, little direct opposition, except in the qualms of the French. Strasbourg has been too recently restored to France for the French to feel completely happy about the symbolic value of the city as a focus of reconciliation.

So far, then, the achievement of the Assembly can be summed up in emotional rather than in practical terms. It has been established; it has made Europe think in terms of a European Parliament; it has evolved a procedure; it is struggling to obtain new rights and powers. In composition, it has probably more jurists and permanent politicians than a directly elected Assembly would have; and trade-union opinion is inadequately represented. But this first session of the Assembly is none the worse for these apparent defects. Assembly's task is largely constitutional and theoretical; and for that end, the representatives are well qualified. The most enduring democratic Parliaments like the British Parliament have grown organically and have been the product of conflict. The prospect of conflict in the Assembly is a bright one. We can, therefore, hope that in course of time, the Consultative Assembly of the Council of Europe, now firmly founded, will become a European institution, respected as a legislature and drawing its sap not from organisations of enthusiasts or from specialists but from the people of Europe as a whole.

Strasbourg, August 12. MAURICE EDELMAN