

Exchange of letters between Morgan Phillips and Leslie Hale (21-22 April 1948)

Caption: The letters exchanged on 21 and 22 April 1948 between Morgan Phillips, General Secretary of the British Labour Party, and Leslie Hale, Labour MP, highlight the tensions in the Labour Party regarding its participation in the Congress of Europe in The Hague.

Source: The Library of the London School of Economics and Political Science - Archives and Rare Books, London, 10 Portugal Street, WC2A 2HD. <http://www.lse.ac.uk/library/archive/Default.htm>, Ronald William Gordon Mackay papers. European papers and correspondence 1947-1950, MACKAY/5/1.

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The Labour Party
Transport House, Smith Square,
S.W.1.

21st April, 1948.

Dear Leslie Hale,

It has come to my notice that the attitude of the National Executive Committee towards members of the Labour Party who participate in the Hague Congress is being mis-represented. I have therefore to remind you that the national Executive Committee strongly disapproves of members taking part in the Hague Congress, whether as individuals or as representatives of organisations. The national Executive Committee is unconditionally opposed to any action which might appear to associate the prestige of the governing majority party in Great Britain, however indirectly, with an organisation calculated to serve the interests of the British Conservative Party.

I do not need to emphasise that the Labour Party is firmly attached to the ideal of European unity. Last month we took the initiative in convening the socialist Parties from all countries participating in the European Recovery Programme, in order to co-ordinate a common socialist approach to the problem. The resolution unanimously approved by this Conference on March 22nd, 1948, included the following statement:

"The ideal of European unity can only be saved from corruption by reactionary politicians if the Socialists place themselves at the head of the movement for its realisation."

Furthermore, all the Socialist Parties present agreed that they would not participate in the Hague Congress and that they would discourage their members from attending as individuals.

We are not a coalition Party. We believe, as responsible for the most powerful Socialist Government in Europe, we have a special duty to our Socialist colleagues on the Continent - the duty of preserving a continuous initiative throughout the complex negotiations from which European unity is being born. The association of our own party members with anti-socialist elements at home or abroad will gravely jeopardise our fulfilment of this duty.

I trust that you will therefore reconsider your published intention of attending the Hague Congress and I shall be glad to hear of your decision.

Yours sincerely,
MORGAN PHILLIPS (signed)
SECRETARY

From:- C. Leslie Hale, M.P.,

22nd April, 1948.

My dear Morgan,

Before I dismiss your formal letter of the 21st April with my colleagues I thought I ought to write and acknowledge your personal letter to me, and to say with what surprise I received it.

Two things really distress me about it at once. The first is the time it was sent. I am not going into all the details in this personal note, but we have made clear our intention of participating in the Hague Conference for months, and no ban of any kind has been suggested.

The original announcement, as I recollect it, and I am writing at once without reference to the papers, was that Party Members would be discouraged from going. That is the word that you use in your letter, and I should have thought that "discouraged" meant 'not encouraged'.

At a later date it was stated that members were quite free to go as individuals, as long as they did not go as representing the Parliamentary Labour Party.

Many of us for the whole of this period have been in touch with you personally, have discussed the matter freely with members of the Cabinet, and, as your letter implies, I, myself, discussed it with the acting Chairman of the Executive, who made it quite clear that that was the position, that we were quite free to go as individuals, and it was only after the discussion with him that I announced publicly to my officers and constituents that I would definitely go.

More than all this, as you know, there are two Parliamentary Groups on European Unity, the Labour Party Group, which has always been open to every member of the Labour Party, and the All-Party Group, which was open to all members of the House, and both these Groups have been very widely attended.

The question of going to the Hague was raised and carried at the Labour Party Group, although there were certainly a number of dissentients. I cannot remember the figures, I think there was a substantial majority, but I was certainly the one who pressed most strongly the suggestion that we should go.

So far as I recollect at the All-Party Group it was later carried at a widely attended meeting, the only dissentient being Sir. Waldron Smithers.

Both these meetings have been summoned on the Whips, including the official Labour Whip, and, as I have said, have been widely attended; and as you know these Groups did agree on an all-party motion, which I believe states the socialist case pretty well, and which has been signed by some 190 members of the House.

In all these circumstances I am very deeply concerned that an action which must have been known to the Executive for many weeks should now be the subject of what appears to approach very near to an official ban; when all the arrangements have been made, engagements have been entered into, announcements have been made to our constituents, and the whole question has been freely and frankly discussed with members of the executive and members of the Cabinet.

I am not in this letter trying to argue the merits of the matter. The view I took from the start was that the Hague Conference would be represented in the press as an all-party conference, even if it had been very sparsely attended by socialists, and that it would be very much wiser for us to try to capture the Conference for the socialists, and as I say, the subject for discussion will undoubtedly be our all-party motion, which I think is a socialist motion, and which I think will be carried.

The other point of view which I know is equally honestly held, is that we are being led up the garden path by the Tories, who are trying to make political capital out of it, and we have made every effort in these few weeks to see that the Socialist parties in Europe were widely represented on precisely the same terms, namely that they went as individuals and not as official delegations from their respective parliaments, and I am greatly concerned that I myself in these discussions represented that as the official attitude of the Labour Executive.

You will remember too, that before these discussions commenced the Prime Minister on 23rd January 1948,

Hansard Column 16 was asked by Mr. Churchill and Mr. Delargy to say a word about the all-party committee on United Europe. The Prime Minister said: - 'I have already said that we welcome the fullest support for the United European idea, as regards any particular organisation it would not be right for the Government to pronounce a ruling on it, but we have always welcomed and supported it. This is a voluntary organisation for the propaganda of ideas'.

Mr. Churchill: - 'With very great respect all I am asking is that the Government should let it be free and open for all to do what they think right'.

Prime Minister: - 'It is really not a matter about which the Government can take a decision. It is free for anybody to join in the organisation.'

This has been no hole and corner conspiracy. It has been full, free, frank and open with the knowledge of everybody concerned.

I can well understand that it might be, that at first sight I am misinterpreting your letter, and that I am placing a wrong emphasis on it, and that what you are merely doing is to send us a formal request to reconsider the matter but are not attempting to impose any ban. I hope that is the case.

I am writing only for myself, but the 40 odd members who have made all arrangements to go to the Hague represent the most loyal and most active supporters of the Government.

If I myself am confronted with the decision that I have either got to go to my constituency and say that I have abandoned the decision I publicly announced, and which I announced as what I considered to be a great step for world peace, and if we are to leave Mr. Churchill to go to the Hague and point to two and three hundred empty chairs, and that although the socialists of Europe have publicly announced their intention to co-operate, they have abandoned their idealism in response to the Whip, I should regard it indeed as a major political disaster, and speaking without reflection before consultation with my colleagues, I do not think it is a decision I could possibly take. Certainly I would prefer to resign my seat and to continue as a loyal member of the Labour Party outside the House.

I have marked this letter personal as your letter to me was marked personal, but I only mean by that that I should not use your letter to me unless you authorise me to do so, and if you feel it desirable to get the matter clarified, that you should use my letter, you are very free to do so, but I would prefer to write to you more formally when I have had more time for thought.

I am hoping, however, that this letter may assist in clarifying the matter in such a way as to avoid some of the major difficulties that might ensue if we have placed a wrong interpretation on it.

Yours sincerely,