

The Council of Europe

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At the end of the Second World War, several ideas began to take shape for the creation of joint, effective political institutions. Western Europe soon realised that its recovery would come through unity. At the Hague Congress in May 1948, European federalists called for the rapid creation of a structure for political cooperation. The United States, which was already giving financial backing to the free countries of Europe, also promoted the idea of political cooperation among the democracies of Western Europe, which might include the future Federal Republic of Germany (FRG).

In August 1948, Paul Ramadier, acting on a mandate from the International Committee of the Movements for European Unity, submitted to the governments of the 16 member countries of the fledgling Organisation for European Economic Cooperation (OEEC) a plan for a European Assembly that would be the linchpin of a future European union.

France and the Benelux countries proposed the creation of an independent assembly and envisaged the transfer of some national sovereignty to a decision-making body. In so doing, they sought to demonstrate their good intentions to pro-Europeans and to respond to American appeals to resolve the German question. While Guy Mollet readily called for a Federal European Parliament, the United Kingdom and the Scandinavian countries preferred the idea of close intergovernmental cooperation. The European Parliamentary Union and the European Movement also put forward their views. A compromise was finally reached between British and Continental interests. The governments of the European states agreed to appoint a body comprising a Consultative Assembly and a Committee of Ministers, which would take decisions unanimously and would have the final say.

In London, on 5 May 1949, ten states signed the Statute of the Council of Europe: Belgium, Denmark, France, Ireland, Italy, Luxembourg, Norway, the Netherlands, the United Kingdom and Sweden. It was the very first international parliamentary assembly. The first representatives were appointed by their national parliaments or by their governments. The Council had its permanent seat in Strasbourg, a city that had long been fought over by Germany and France.

According to the Preamble, the aim of its members is the pursuit of peace based upon justice and international cooperation, the safeguarding of the principles of freedom, democracy and the rule of law and the promotion of social and economic progress.

Article 1 of the Council of Europe statutes clearly sets out the mission of the organisation which 'is to achieve a greater unity between its members for the purpose of safeguarding and realising the ideals and principles which are their common heritage and facilitating their economic and social progress'.