

Address given by Peter Thorneycroft to the WEU Assembly (Paris, 4 December 1962)


Caption: On 4 December 1962, Peter Thorneycroft, British Minister of Defence, gives an address to the Assembly of Western European Union (WEU). He emphasises that the United Kingdom, as a European country, is deeply concerned with the defence of Europe, and emphasises the importance of establishing a common, effective instrument of defence for Europe. The minister discusses the need for European countries to work together on research and on the development of European armaments.

Source: Assembly of Western European Union. ‘Speech by Mr. Thorneycroft, Minister of Defence of the United Kingdom (Paris, tenth sitting, 4rd December 1962)’ in Proceedings: Eighth ordinary session: Second Part, Vol. IV, Minutes: Official Report of Debates. Paris: Assembly of WEU. December 1962, pp. 87-91.

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**4. Speech by Mr. Thorneycroft,
Minister of Defence of the United Kingdom**

The PRESIDENT (Translation). — The next Order of the Day is thus the address by Mr. Thorneycroft, United Kingdom Minister of Defence.

You are all aware, Ladies and Gentlemen, of the contribution made by Mr. Thorneycroft to the cause of European unity. He has long been a fighter for the ideals to which we all subscribe. I feel sure that, in his present responsible post as United Kingdom Minister of Defence, he will continue to support the Assembly of Western European Union and to bring his whole mind to bear on the problems confronting us.

We are grateful to Mr. Thorneycroft for having been kind enough to come here today, and we welcome him most warmly.

I call Mr. Thorneycroft, United Kingdom Minister of Defence.

MR. THORNEYCROFT (*Minister of Defence of the United Kingdom*). — Mr. President, I thank you for the honour you have done me by inviting me to address the Assembly. It is a personal satisfaction for me, but it is also, I think, a compliment to my office. This is, I believe, the third occasion that a United Kingdom Minister of Defence has been invited to address you within eighteen months, and I hope we shall not outlive our welcome.

If I speak for the first time as Minister of Defence to a European audience, it is, as you, Mr. President, have said not the first time that I have addressed a European audience. Indeed, it has been my privilege in public life to hold quite a number of offices, and I think that in all of them I have been fortunate enough to have been associated with my opposite numbers on the Continent.

As President of the Board of Trade, I had my earliest contacts with the problems of Europe. In those days there were the problems of trade and commerce, and in the aftermath of war and the recovery from it I remember well that we were much engaged in putting quota restrictions against one another, an era which in the main is happily now past. I remember also working with the Coal and Steel Community

at Strasbourg, which set something of the pattern of what has emerged since.

As Chancellor of the Exchequer, I had the honour to be the Chairman of the Organisation for European Economic Co-operation, and saw something of, and perhaps even participated a little in, the efforts which Europe was then making to contrive a more united front. Latterly, after a period for retirement and reflection, which never comes amiss in public life, I returned to the scene in the rôle of Minister of Aviation.

Aviation matters provide a fruitful field for co-operation. Indeed I was privileged to assist in the early stages of two vital projects. First, there was the European Launcher Development Organisation, which I think has given to many countries in Europe opportunities for technological adventure on the very frontiers of knowledge. I believe that this will pay a great dividend to Europe, not simply in what it puts up, but in the technological experience it leaves behind. Secondly, there were the preliminary discussions on a joint project between the United Kingdom and France for a Mach II supersonic air-liner, now happily in the process of conclusion by my friend Julian Amery and Mr. Dusseaulx. I therefore approach these problems with a fairly solid record of European co-operation behind me and counting a great many Europeans among my friends.

It is against this background that I approach the more sombre problems of defence. It is, indeed, difficult to talk rationally about such an irrational subject as war in its modern guise, and I do not propose to give you a great dissertation upon strategy. I would prefer to reflect for a few moments on some of the practical considerations which affect the sum total of the defence effort which Europe can deploy and determine to some extent the direction in which she is to deploy it. When my predecessor, Mr. Harold Watkinson, had the honour of addressing you last June, he took as his subject the United Kingdom's responsibilities outside the NATO area, and he commented on the practical limi-

Mr. Thorneycroft (continued)

tations set to the defence effort by economic considerations and by manpower. I would like to quote one passage from his speech. He said:

“We are quite clear that it would help nobody except Mr. Khrushchev to spend so much on defence that we undermine the free, vigorous, prosperous society which is the West's most effective challenge in the minds of men.”

I think that in those words he pinpointed a problem which confronts us all in Europe. It is that very free, vigorous and prosperous society upon the construction of which you have all been very busily engaged; and though I shall say a word or two in a moment about the weapons of war which are paradoxically necessary to the prevention of war, let us remember and recognise the part played by a vigorous and prosperous society in the battle for men's minds.

It is, Mr. President, the presence here in Western Europe of prosperous and happy nations — and may I say prosperous and happy people — much occupied with the arts of peace which provides the really solid barrier to the infiltration of Communist ideas. Our task as Defence Ministers, indeed the task of all of us concerned with defence, is hard and complex enough in all conscience. It would be impossible if large sections of those we sought to defend had grave doubts about the value of the system we sought to safeguard.

Do not misunderstand me. I do not say that we should neglect our arms or avoid spending a great deal on them. I do not know whether any words spoken here will creep back to the Chancellor of the Exchequer in the United Kingdom, but I must confess that we are already spending on defence 7% of everything we produce and I see little chance of that percentage declining. But I do say that the economic wellbeing of Europe is a necessary base for any worthwhile European defence efforts. If I may say so

without trespassing on any further discussions you may have, a Europe which was weak and divided would present problems in defence far different and far graver than in a strong and united Europe, which I believe all of us in our hearts would wish to see. So much for the background.

I have been talking about the nature of the nations and the people we seek to defend. Now a few words about the threat. We should have no illusions about the threat. It is the declared purpose of the Communist world to destroy the system under which we live. The threat may come not necessarily in Europe and not necessarily by military action, but it is ever present and all pervading. On the land it is in the form of arms, conventional and unconventional. In the air it is in the form of aircraft, but mostly of missiles. It is from the sea and from under the sea. It is by propaganda in the periphery of the western world's sphere of influence and it is by infiltration into the trade union movement at the very centre of our affairs.

It is not a simple matter to meet that threat, and it is not simply for Defence Ministers to meet it. The decision on what one can spend, and on what one ought to spend it, in defence is at first sight almost harder for the United Kingdom than for most European countries, and I want to reflect for a few moments about this. As Europeans, we in the United Kingdom are deeply concerned with the defence of Europe, and we are concerned not simply from friendship or from sentiment, but from direct self-interest. This is our continent as well as the continent of other Europeans. Equally, as an island wholly dependent on world trade we have to export, I believe, about one-quarter of everything we make in order to live. Winston Churchill once declared that if we stopped exporting, half the population would have to leave and there would be a great deal of ill feeling as to which part had to leave.

Faced with those circumstances, we are dependent upon buying and selling in every continent. We have a world-wide interest — and this is not some nostalgic imperialistic dream.

Mr. Thorneycroft (continued)

It is not mistaking memories for hopes. It is the hard, practical reality of the world in which we live. It is again, if you like, self-interest: and yet, is our interest, the interest of the United Kingdom, in any way markedly different from that of our fellow Europeans? I do not think so. I do not believe that any of us think that we can discharge our defence functions as Europeans by looking exclusively at the soil of Europe and ignoring the world outside. It would indeed be a myopic view of strategy. It would make the fatal mistake of many a beaten commander in the field of concentrating on the centre and forgetting all about the flanks.

In any event, my belief is that Europeans linked ever more closely in defence will be planning together not only the defence of this continent, vital though it is, but of the flanks, of the lines of communication, of the sources of supply, of the ever-growing external markets. Europe is potentially not a parish but a world power, and we must think of her defence along those lines. These are not insular but common interests, and in their defence we have a great and important ally in the United States of America. When the history of these years comes to be written tribute will be paid to the rôle which America has played, and not least in Europe. She has grudged neither money nor military effort, often subordinating, as in the case of the Common Market, short-term interests to the wider hopes and larger vision of a powerful and united Europe. She has recognised that the interests of the West, including America, are better secured by a strong Europe than by a weak and divided one.

I turn then to the strength of Europe. We tend often to be rather critical of one another's efforts — most families are — and in the process we tend to forget the strength which our efforts properly combined and wisely used in fact provide. I know you will acquit me of any discourtesy if I do not comment in detail on Mr. Duynstee's report, in which he presents a very comprehensive and interesting paper on European security which touches on some, at

least, of the complex and controversial problems of European defence. Most of them have economic and political as well as military overtones. But I am sure this report as presented to you and the discussions upon it will be widely noted and will help to clarify thought on these difficult issues.

There is one point, however, on which I might touch: that which is made in the paper that the British deterrent forces can be regarded as dangerous, expensive, prone to obsolescence and lacking in credibility as a deterrent. Dangerous, yes, to any enemy very dangerous indeed. Prone to obsolescence, certainly, but so is everything and everybody. Expensive, certainly — for the price of deterring war is not cheap. Lacking in credibility as a deterrent? I think that is an illusion. I would say with all the emphasis I can command that the United Kingdom is today, and will be even more with existing equipment for many years to come, capable of inflicting such damage on any potential aggressor as greatly to outweigh anything an aggressor can conceivably hope to gain; and that is what a deterrent means.

Our task must be not to criticise each other's efforts, whether they be the great land armies of France and Germany or the British Army of the Rhine, whose problems I hope to study on the spot in a few weeks' time, or the British deterrent, or the Royal Navy, but to study constantly how best to weld them into an effective instrument of defence for Europe and for the western world of which Europe is a part.

There is one aspect of this task to which I think I should make special reference — the problem of interdependence, or, as the Americans call it, complementarity, in research, development and production. I think we should welcome the report submitted by Mr. Kliesing on behalf of the Committee on Defence Questions and Armaments. It is critical of efforts so far made, and will, I think, be a useful support in the campaign for interdependence. I can, I think, claim to know enough of this subject at least to know some of the difficulties of it and perhaps to make some small contribution to it.

Mr. Thorneycroft (continued)

The forces of Europe will demand, whether they are deployed on the central German plains or in the Persian Gulf, more and more sophisticated equipment, and the cost of this equipment is rising faster than other costs. We are all in peril either of having out-of-date equipment or of straining our economies to danger point in order to provide it. These are the twin horns of the dilemma upon which we are in danger of being impaled, and our situation has been worsened by a narrow national approach which all of us in part have adopted in the past and to which all of us are constantly tempted from feelings either of national pride or of commercial interest.

What is needed for larger projects — and we are talking here of very large projects indeed — is large capital resources and large markets, and it is these attributes which facilitate the solutions which have been reached in Soviet Russia and the United States of America. Europe could find the same solutions. The combined capital and technical resources of Europe are equal to anything that can be found outside. The problem is how best to use them.

The hardest task is often to reconcile requirements. It is not easy to persuade the air forces of France, Germany, Benelux and Italy all to want the same thing at the same moment. Passionately they all want different things in different time scales. Even when agreement is reached on strategy and tactics, you would be surprised at the diversity which is arrived at as to the means to carry out that agreed strategy and tactics, as, for example, in the case of tanks.

Nevertheless, the search for ideal solutions for each nation's problems and each service's requirement has resulted in some costly weaknesses for Europe as a whole. The members of this Assembly know the difficulty of urging interdependence particularly where it may mean some order going to a foreign firm. There is a big rôle for parliamentarians to play in recog-

nising and stating this problem, in leading and not following public opinion.

Do not let us underestimate the achievements. There have been large exchanges of completed material — tactical nuclear weapons from the United States; small arms from Belgium; we have been buying the French Alouette helicopters, we have been buying howitzers from Italy; and the Germans have just bought a tank gun from us. Many of us have been combined for the air-to-air guided missile Bullpup, with Norway as the prime contractor.

We need combined work on research and development, and we need some truly European projects. Your report refers to the combined programme on the Hawker P. 1127, which is the smaller and lighter type of vertical take-off fighter. It is the most advanced type of aircraft actually flying in the world today, and that may lead to some important developments. Let us try to make them on a European rather than a national basis.

There are many minor but important examples especially in the naval field. Happily, the navies, because they operate at sea, I suppose, appear to live in a nation of their own. They regard anyone of whatever nationality who lives on land as a slightly separate race. In these circumstances, they are prepared to combine perhaps more than any other service in work of this character.

We can get some benefits from the joint use of facilities — for example, wind tunnels and firing ranges. We welcome the Germans to our firing ranges. We have been doing airborne training with the French. But, plainly, we have a long way to go. We must note the suggestions in the report of an armaments production pool and consider them — though, I think, in the light of the Brussels negotiations. The picture, however, is not altogether dark. Failures make the news, but successes are equally relevant to the future.

Mr. Thorneycroft (continued)

I conclude by saying that Europe, for all its history, is at the beginning rather than the end of the journey. As we set out upon it, we may look very critically at one another, but I have a fancy that before we have gone very far along that road we may find increasing value in one another's peculiarities and idiosyncracies, and certainly in the defence field we shall be wise to concentrate on using to the utmost the help and strength which each of us is best able to subscribe, for if we stand together the future promises well, but if we fall apart, then in the words of the philosopher, Hobbes, our future is likely to be "solitary, poor, nasty, brutish and short".

The PRESIDENT (Translation). — First, let me thank Mr. Thorneycroft most warmly for his address. He has very kindly agreed to answer any questions that members of the Assembly may wish to put to him. I would like to know whether he thinks this can be done at a public Sitting or whether he would prefer it to take place in secret session.

Mr. THORNEYCROFT (*Minister of Defence of the United Kingdom*). — It should be in restricted session.

The PRESIDENT (Translation). — Mr. Thorneycroft would prefer the questions and answers to take place in secret session.

It is for the Assembly to decide. According to Article IX of the Charter and Rule 20 of the Rules of Procedure "the debates of the Assembly shall be held in public unless the Assembly decides otherwise."

Are there any objections to our sitting in secret session?...

There will be a secret session.

To enable the necessary arrangements to be made, the Sitting will be suspended for a few moments.

When the Sitting is resumed, the public will not be admitted to the galleries, and entry to the Assembly Hall will be strictly supervised.

The questions and answers will not appear in the Minutes of Proceedings or in the two Official Reports of Debates.

The Sitting is suspended and will be resumed in secret session in ten minutes.

(*The public Sitting was suspended at 11.05 a.m. and resumed at 11.50 a.m.*)

The PRESIDENT (Translation). — The Sitting is resumed.

5. State of European Security - A NATO Nuclear Force

(*Resumed Debate on the Report of the Committee on Defence Questions and Armaments and Vote on the draft Recommendation, Doc. 251 and Amendment*)

The PRESIDENT (Translation). — We will now resume the interrupted debate on the report of the Committee on Defence Questions and Armaments on the state of European security — a NATO nuclear force, Document 251.

I call Mr. Kershaw.

Mr. KERSHAW (*United Kingdom*). — I fear that the resumption of the debate after the interesting speech from the United Kingdom Minister of Defence and the questions will seem rather an anticlimax. The report of Mr. Duynstee, which I read with tremendous interest, poses for us a question which many of us approach with reluctance, because the prospect of a proliferation of nuclear forces must give us cause to think.

One has a feeling on the one hand, that such extra nuclear forces may be unnecessary, which, of course, poses the question of control, to which allusion has already been made. There are those who think we would be safer without other nuclear forces. I am not disposed to disagree violently with that, but the fact remains that other nuclear forces besides the United States force exist and that more will be created in future. Therefore, it is clearly the duty of an Assembly such as ours to examine how these forces can best be organised in future.