



Provisional edition

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Official report of debates

Statement by Mr. Paul-Henri SPAAK after his resignation as President of the Consultative Assembly

Mr Paul-Henri SPAAK (Former Prime Minister of Belgium and Former President of the Assembly)*: Mr President, Ladies and Gentlemen, let me assure you that I have no intention of availing myself of this opportunity to make a speech. In any case, I think this would be quite beyond me this morning. I shall confine myself – with your kind indulgence – to making a few general remarks, which I hope will be brief, in order to explain why I shall vote in favour of the Amendment put forward by Mr Teitgen and Mr de Menthon, in the same way as I have made up my mind to support any Motion which will enable the Council of Europe to emerge from the period of negative policy and stagnation into which it has entered, and in the same spirit and purpose as I should have yesterday voted for the Motion by Mr de Félice, despite the fact that I have myself never been a federalist.

Ladies and Gentlemen, from the Presidential Chair occupied by me until yesterday, I noticed things which often made me very sad. I have been continually surprised at the amount of talent expended in this Assembly in explaining why something should not be done. To-day everyone has his own good reasons why he should not make any more. Some Germans will not support a united Europe until the whole of Germany is united. Some Belgians will do so only if the United Kingdom joins in. Some Frenchmen are against a unification of Europe if it entails their being left to negotiate direct with the Germans. The British will not form part of a united Europe so long as they have not found a solution acceptable both to themselves and the Commonwealth. Our Scandinavian friends look on at all this in a somewhat disillusioned and disinterested manner, or so it appears.

I am quite convinced that if a quarter of the energy expended in this Assembly in saying “no” were devoted to saying “yes” to something positive when it is forthcoming, we should not find ourselves in the position we are to-day. (Applause.)

During this last Session I also found out something else of a more serious and distressing nature. Ladies and Gentlemen, I do not wish to hurt anyone's feelings, and I should like to use most parliamentary language, but I have come to the firm conclusion that in this Assembly there are not more than sixty Representatives who really believe in the need for a united Europe. Of course, everyone proclaims that he is a good European, and only yesterday Mr Gordon Waiker, with a certain amount of vexation, again said so, in reply to a speech by Mr Paul Reynaud. Let me, however, at once say to him: “I am convinced of your complete sincerity, my friend, but what I am equally convinced of is that when you say ‘I am a good European,’ you, evidently, do not mean

In this report:

- speeches in English are reported in full;
- speeches in other languages are reported using the interpretation and are marked with an asterisk (*);
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the same thing as I do when I say it. We just look at things in quite different ways. If it were not somewhat presumptuous on my part to do so, I should even say that our present respective points of view in looking at history are not the same."

It is my impression – I may be exaggerating slightly, but not very much – that a number of our colleagues are wondering whether what we are doing serves any very useful purpose. And I, personally, wonder whether they do not really think: "is it of any great interest?"

Now there, you see, is just where our points of view completely differ. Whereas some of us are scarcely concerned at all whether the work done here is necessary or useful, others among us consider what we set about doing as something vital and urgently necessary.

I admire those who can remain calm in the face of the present state of Europe. One could be terribly blunt about that if we were not obliged to be so parliamentary. Nevertheless, just cast your minds back for a moment over recent years and ask yourselves what Europe was like only a matter of fifty years ago. I do not ask you to go back to the days of its former splendour. How can those who, whether they come from Rome, Athens, Paris or London, remember what their countries were like and what their capitals stood for in the world and compare it with the state we are all in to-day, possibly remain so calm and collected in the face of events?

The Europe we are speaking of here is a Europe which we have, in the first place, allowed to be rent asunder. Poland, Czechoslovakia, Hungary, the Balkan States and Eastern Germany no longer exist. The Europe we are discussing here is a Europe against which both Asia and Africa are to-day in revolt, and the greatest and most powerful among us, even to-day, is being defied in Iran and Egypt. The Europe we are speaking of to-day is one that for five years has been living in fear of the Russians and on the charity of the Americans.

In the face of all this we remain impassive, as if history were standing still and as if we had decades at our disposal quietly to change our whole outlook, do away with customs barriers, abandon selfish nationalistic viewpoints, as if we had all Eternity before us.

There, Ladies and Gentlemen, you have the substance of the conflicting views obtaining in this Assembly. We believe that, if we wish to save this old Continent of ours, including Great Britain as well as the other countries, it is absolutely essential that we should set about creating a united Europe. Many of you give us the impression that you are not giving any thought to this matter. Mr Gordon Walker has stated: "I am a good European and I assure you that I wish to cooperate with you." But what has he repeatedly told us during this past fortnight? He has said this: "Well, let us go to work together, let us support Governmental agreements and let us try to increase their number and make them better!"

Now that may be one way of achieving a united Europe, although I do not myself very clearly see what it means. Do you, however, really believe that in order to support Governmental agreements it was necessary to build this House of Europe and convene twice a year two hundred European Members of Parliament? Do you not think that our respective Governments are quite capable of looking after governmental agreements without our help? When you speak of the most interesting governmental agreements which have been concluded in recent years, you mention O.E.E.C. and E.P.U., in which our Assembly had no part whatsoever.

If, in effect, this is going to represent all the cooperation to be expected from some people towards establishing a united Europe, then, quite frankly, I feel it would be better to do away with all this machinery than to lull people into believing that something important is being accomplished – all those people who, when after each Session they take stock of the progress we have made in our work, are bound to become more and more disillusioned.

During this past fortnight we have let slip every opportunity afforded to us. In the first place, we have failed to profit in a courageous manner from the frank and categorical statements made to us by all the British delegates. Of course, we must again point out to them – and I apologise for doing so – that we came here with a certain amount of hope. We thought that the political change which had taken place in Britain would provide us with a new opportunity of closer cooperation. We anxiously awaited what the Conservative Government representatives were going to tell us, and we also impatiently awaited what the Labour representatives, who had now become the Opposition, were going to confide to us.

You have never been – and I say this to your credit – more categorical and definite in your statements, in telling us that, while fully appreciating what a united Europe meant to us, you would never follow us along this road or along these lines!

I say this not without a certain amount of disappointment and bitterness, but in no way, in a vindictive spirit. Those statements that we were waiting for, on which we had counted and in which we had placed some of our hopes did not come to pass; we ought then to have been courageous enough to face up to the blunt fast confronting us.

Gentlemen, beware. We continental Europeans have said a number of times that we did not understand everything the British told us about the Commonwealth and its difficulties, but sometimes – and here let me speak to you quite frankly – we had the feeling that these difficulties which you explained to us badly and invoked unceasingly constituted some kind of pretext rather than any valid reason. We had the feeling that we could not reckon on your cooperation on account of the Commonwealth. But be very careful! Sometime hence, public opinion will say that Continental Europeans are using the absence of Britain as an excuse not to create a United Europe. We shall then lose, in the eyes of those who had placed so much hope in the European idea and of those whose only hope it perhaps is at the present time, our entire good name and forfeit all the confidence they may have had in us.

From the very beginning of this session my mind was made up and my attitude clear and unequivocal. I do not say: establish a united Europe, taking your line from Britain – since we should not really be establishing a united Europe by basing ourselves at the present time on a Conservative or a Labour Britain; on the contrary, we should be giving up the idea – but I do say that we should courageously face up to the facts as they are and take a risk.

Ladies and Gentlemen, I shall not go as far as to say that none is more conscious than I of the risks we are running at the present time in trying to establish a united continental Europe. Why “none more than I”? I assume that all who are desirous of setting up a united continental Europe are fully cognisant of the risks of such a policy. But what policy of any importance does not include some kind of risk? Our whole life is nothing but a constant process of choosing between one risk and another, and those who have never risked anything in their lives or in their policy have never achieved anything outstanding.

Instead of taking up a courageous attitude in the face of the new British position, we have tried to find formulas expressing unanimity, which are merely formulas testifying to our weakness. During the past few days further misunderstandings have arisen concerning serious problems, which have enabled some members to imagine that the British “no” was not entirely unqualified and that by waiting a little longer and remaining inactive and passive we might eventually see them join us.

And then yesterday we let slip the opportunity of our lives, the opportunity of the life of our European Assembly. Yesterday's Sitting was indeed an historic one, and what makes me so sad is that it was only historic up to the time the Ministers ceased speaking. When it was our turn to speak, I saw nothing more whatsoever that bore an historic stamp. (*Smiles.*)

We saw Ministers who came to address us and who for the first time came not only to explain their policy but to seek our support and encouragement. It was indeed a historic event for four Ministers of four European countries to come here and tell us: “we are in favour of a united Europe and are prepared to try to achieve it because we are impelled towards it by a number of facts, on which I shall not dwell, by a kind of fatality and logic of history. We are prepared to fight, if need be, to establish a political authority in the sphere of defence and foreign affairs”. We were fully conscious of the stirring nature of their speeches. What they came to tell us, in effect, was: “we are up against difficulties in our respective countries and we have to overcome obstacles and break down all manner of old prejudices and ancient traditions. What we ask is that you, the Representatives of Europe, should give us a message to assist and strengthen us in our task”.

And what was our reply? We gave none at all! We drew up and adopted a Motion whose Rapporteur, in order to re-assure certain members of the Assembly and achieve a miserable majority, did not even dare to state that it aimed at creating a real international political authority. He allowed doubt to continue to subsist and even so; despite this, a large number of Representatives voted against the Motion. We referred the four Ministers who had come here to ask us to help them back to a Committee of Ministers whose decisions have to be unanimous; we therefore know that it will not be able to assist them.

What should we have done? At that historic moment we ought to have gone beyond the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe, and, addressing ourselves to the four Ministers or to the six countries which are prepared to found a European Coal and Steel Community, have told them: “we are now going to set to work without delay to explain to you how we suggest that this European Community should be operate.”

We were unable to do this since we knew that if we took up that attitude, not a single motion would have obtained a two-thirds majority.

We were again obliged to adopt another of those compromises which under present circumstances are of no interest at all.

I wonder whether you realise how – if I may say so – ridiculous it is to ask the Committee of Ministers, comprising twelve Ministers with whom we are familiar and whose views we know, to organise conferences for the purpose of setting up international political Authorities, whereas almost half of those Ministers have already stated quite formally that they are not in favour of this, and when it is borne in mind that each of them possesses, within the Committee of Ministers, a right of veto. If that is all we are capable of doing, then I truly believe that we are at the end of our tether and I do not consider that I am being too pessimistic in saying so.

You see, I have the impression that we are dying of our own discretion. And how much discretion there is in this Assembly! (Smiles) How very reasonable people can be! How careful they are in their speeches! How clever they are at all matters of procedure and how much talent they display in discussing a word or a comma! Ladies and Gentlemen, it is frightful – your moderation is nothing short of suicidal.

I remember one day reading in Bernard Shaw's *Joan of Arc* a witticism I have never forgotten and which, alas! I am obliged to make use of from time to time. This is the occasion. Joan of Arc appears before Charles VII – and this is not intended to represent any historical analogy. France is occupied by the English, and Charles VII has taken refuge at Bourges; he has become the little king of Bourges, and no one trusts him any longer. Then Joan appears, with nothing but her faith and her hope. She speaks. Everybody makes fun of her, including the generals, the bishops and the lawyers, until a youth who is to be her companion in battle and, let us not forget, in victory as well, says, while everyone around her keeps on repeating that she is out of her mind, that she is mad: "we want a few mad people now. See where the sane ones have landed us!"

Well, from time to time one feels in this Assembly as if one would like to be a little mad, to cast one's discretion and reason aside, to believe that, in order to build great things in this world, a little hope, a little confidence and a little faith achieve more than all the discretion of formal routine procedure.

Now why do I ask you to vote for Mr Teitgen's Amendment? I ask you to do so because it is something positive and because it explains clearly, much more clearly than the two Articles of the Statute to which it applies, the goal which some of us are trying to attain.

I am sure Mr Teitgen and Mr de Menthon will agree with me when I say that their idea is not entirely new and that its original author was Mr Mackay, who incorporated it in a Protocol which the Assembly has too often treated with disdain. It was unfortunately, not realised that at that time Mr Mackay, and now Mr Teitgen and Mr de Menthon, have provided us with the solution to a problem we have been up against from the beginning.

What a splendid day that was when, still full of enthusiasm and illusions the Assembly adopted that resolution almost unanimously and we asked for limited Authorities possessing real powers! Well, for a matter of three years we have been going round and round the question, trying to find out where it would lead us and what it implied, and seeking this or that appropriate formula.

The formula now proposed by Mr Teitgen has the great advantage of providing a *de facto* solution to the problem.

When we tried to define a limited Authority we found that it was not possible, to do so, since there is no such thing as a theoretical definition of a limited Authority. The effect of Mr Teitgen's Amendment would be to confer executive power on the Assembly as and when the practical problems arising in connection with the Specialised Authorities came to be resolved. There is, therefore, no further need for a theoretical definition of limited powers. Each time a Specialised Authority is set up, and a particular problem solved, little by little the Assembly's executive power will have *de facto* come into being and developed.

Not everything would be, even then, as we would wish it, but we should have at least achieved something positive, and that is why I shall vote for the Amendment by Mr Teitgen and Mr de Menthon. I shall vote for it in the same way as I shall vote for anything which at the present time, without seeking vain compromise, shows those who are watching us from outside or who report our debates that there are still a number of Representatives to this Assembly who take the problem of building up a united Europe seriously and that we are prepared to sacrifice for the sake of Europe as a whole things to which we are attached as much as any other country in the world, namely a part of our national sovereignty and, in some cases, even – as I have always plainly stated – certain material interests.

To-day, whether we like it or not, interest in the cause of a united Europe no longer lies, I am sorry to say, within this Assembly. Those who wish to continue along the road we have followed in the past few years now realise that the prospects here have become almost hopeless, that we must look beyond these walls and that it is again by having recourse to propaganda and by rousing public opinion, showing it what the real position is and how it can save itself if it wishes to avoid disaster, that the real solution to the problem will be found.

It is because. I have had this profound, and, believe me, bitter feeling during the past two weeks that I wished to resume my complete freedom and to take once more my place amongst the true protagonists of a united Europe in order to say to them ' let us make haste, for we are losing ground. We can no longer do to-day what we could have done a year or two ago, for people are beginning to make fun of us and are speaking of our inability to achieve anything. There is not a moment to lose if we are to save ourselves!

(Applause.)