



Provisional edition

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Official report of debates

Address by the Prime Minister of France

Mr Olivier REVERDIN (Switzerland, President of the Assembly)*: (...) We are now going to listen to the Prime Minister of the French Republic who has done us the honour of coming to address us in spite of the particularly heavy burdens he has to shoulder at the moment. He has managed to spare a few hours to show by his presence here how much importance his government attaches to the twentieth anniversary of the Council of Europe, this Council of Europe which is always available, from which as much has not always been asked as it could give, but which hopes to be made more use of in future and to do even more than it has done.

Mr. Prime Minister, may I ask you to come up to the rostrum. (*Applause*)

Mr Maurice COUVE DE MURVILLE (Prime Minister of France)*: Mr. President, I am grateful to your Assembly for having invited me to take part today in the 20th anniversary celebrations of the Council of Europe. It is on behalf of my government and my country that I thank you, for both of them rejoice that France has from the beginning been your meeting place. The greetings and good wishes I bring you in their name are therefore especially warm and friendly.

In my own name, too, I thank you, first because I feel greatly honoured by your invitation, and secondly on more personal grounds. For it so happens that almost exactly twenty years ago, on 8 August 1949, I was present at the inaugural session of your Assembly, in a very modest capacity, but in circumstances I have never forgotten. Many illustrious persons were there whose names have gone down, or will go down, in history – Winston Churchill and Bevin for Great Britain, Mr. de Valera for Ireland, Sforza and President Saragat for Italy, and for France, among others, Edouard Herriot, Paul Reynaud, Robert Schuman. Nobody, to be sure, had a very clear idea of what the work and role of the new institution might be. Eloquence, not yet a lost art, flowed unrestrained, sincere and moving. Above all there was patently apparent on every side the utmost good will towards an enterprise born of a mighty impulse. That impulse was not yet called the building of Europe, but the feeling was there that, in a continent devastated, tormented and anxious about the future, it corresponded to an irresistible need and ought to lead to understanding and cooperation, even though no one was able to say in what form or by what procedures, in the cause of progress and peace.

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 (*);
- speeches in German and Italian are reproduced in full in a separate document.

I say in the cause of peace because, while all seemed clouded with uncertainty, including the very definition of Europe, everyone was agreed in saying that the first objective was to put an end finally to the fratricidal wars which had periodically marked our history and brought misery to our peoples. Everyone agreed, too, in affirming that the indispensable condition lay in a lasting reconciliation between France and Germany, always the protagonists in these disastrous struggles.

Was not this the reason why Ernest Bevin proposed and secured acceptance for the establishment in Strasbourg of the headquarters of the Council of Europe, even though it did not yet at that time include the new Germany, as an earnest of reconciliation?

Was not this great design also the main theme of Winston Churchill's magnificent and famous speech at Zurich on 16 September 1946? After launching the idea of a United States of Europe, the great statesman added that the first step should be cooperation between France and Germany, that these two countries should together assume the leadership of the new union, that Britain and the Commonwealth, the mighty United States and, he hoped, the Soviet Union – for then all would be well – should be the friends and guarantors of this new Europe and champion its right to exist.

Twenty years have gone by since the historic moments I began by evoking, twenty years in which the whole world has experienced radical change, starting with the vast operation of decolonisation, years in which Europe, for its part, acquired an entirely new image. Perhaps I may be allowed to say, in all humility, that I may have some claim to speak of these since, of those twenty years, as far as France is concerned, eleven have been marked by governments to which I have had the honour of belonging, in particular as Minister for Foreign Affairs; and I do not believe, whatever may be sometimes said, that every achievement in European policy was achieved during the nine previous years.

If a summing-up is to be attempted, today's celebrations naturally suggest that we start with yourselves, that is the Consultative Assembly of the Council of Europe. You make no spectacular claims, certainly, but it would be a great mistake to say that your role over this long period has not been useful and constructive.

You have gradually gathered in, until their number is now complete, all the nations of Europe which we call free. You have succeeded in creating among them all, by your regular meetings, a sense of solidarity, of being part of one world, of real community of interest and of thought. How can one fail to see in this something of importance and indeed of vital significance?

You have made it your habit to discuss our common problems, our respective policies, and the difficulties also that may arise between one or other of us. That, too, is something new for Europe. My hope is that you will go on doing this even more and in ever greater depth, not shrinking from discussing boldly the major problems common to all our countries, irrespective of size or geographical situation, such as relations with Eastern Europe, relations with the United States of America, or the tremendous question of the under-developed countries and our duty towards them.

To that political activity you have sensibly joined a form of action which I might call cooperation. Your Assembly has often been the instigator and prime mover of such co-operation, aimed primarily at the conclusion of practical agreements between us all on the most varied subjects.

I would mention as examples, legal questions and the harmonisation of legislation, social problems, youth problems, public health, education and culture, conservation of nature and natural resources, regional planning, and questions pertaining to local and regional authorities.

Under the general title of "Man in a European Society" all these activities have, for some years now, been embodied in a Work Programme which, while ambitious, is implemented in very good order.

Your Assembly has the merit of always having seen that priority was given in the Work Programme to activities designed to widen man's horizons. In this it has been in line with the ideas of our Secretary General, who has played so important a part in the work of the Council. At this time when Mr Smithers is approaching the end of his term of office, I am glad to have the opportunity of reiterating our appreciation and thanks. I would also like to congratulate my friend Mr Toncic on his splendid election as your new Secretary General and extend to him my warm good wishes for success in his difficult task.

The success of this co-operation within the Council of Europe has, moreover, begun to excite some interest in the Eastern countries, and this is one more outstanding political result to mark up to the credit of our organisation.

I mentioned the Eastern countries. In the record of veritable revolutions accomplished in the past 20 years, how could one fail to lay special stress on the changes that have come about in our relations with that other part of Europe.

1949: The morrow of the Prague coup, the year the Atlantic Pact was signed. Western Europe, in the midst of reconstruction, was obsessed with the threat of another war and drew its sole comfort from the assurance not only of protection but of the presence of a powerful American force.

1969: Nothing is settled, certainly, the German problem to start with. But the cold war is a fading memory, even though Czechoslovakia, wedged between the two halves of Germany, still calls forth our indignation and our sympathy.

This difference results from a slow change which became irresistible from the moment it became evident to all our leaders that a war – necessarily a nuclear one – would be madness and indeed was quite unthinkable on one side or the other. France is glad to have contributed to that change, as soon as it appeared possible, to the best of her ability. It is many years now since she began feeling for and then practising a policy of *détente*. It is many years since she laid the foundations of co-operation with those Eastern countries, many of which are her friends of long standing, and now that co-operation is developing and beginning to bear fruit. General de Gaulle, with his clear-sightedness and prestige, traced that policy in the conviction that a divided Europe is a misfortune for all Europeans, that our continent will never find true peace, the settlement of the German question included, until normal, and if possible friendly, relations have been established from end to end of its geographical confines. That policy, which seemed so highly unorthodox, at first, aroused much criticism and apprehension, ran counter to many conventional ideas. Who remembers this today when it has become the generally adopted policy, when it is becoming increasingly clear that the United States and the Soviet Union are at last coming to the face-to-face dialogue they have been dreaming of for twenty-five years and which we, for our part, cannot but approve, so long as there is no question of those two great powers settling between them the problems of others, and first and foremost those of Europe?

In this changing continent, however, certain permanent needs stand out. The first is the need for stability on which, since mankind, nations and states have existed, everything has always depended and especially peace. In the face of an Eastern Europe that remains monolithic and its regime and its alliances, Western Europe must try to find means of asserting itself and standing on its own feet. I say on its own feet, because otherwise nothing permanent is conceivable even if, for you too, alliances – and you all know what I mean – remain necessary and will long continue to do so, precisely in the interests of the stability I referred to. Therein lies the true justification of what we describe among ourselves as “building Europe”.

This was certainly not so in 1949. Perhaps our elder statesmen still think of our great undertaking in terms of that period, by which I mean a combination designed purely to defend everything west of an iron curtain which divided Europe in two, and Germany with it, and which an indefinite cold war would prevent from ever being raised.

In 1969 the prospects are different. And it is in the light of these new prospects that France, for her part, conceives European unity.

Obviously nothing could be undertaken unless the conditions of a lasting peace were established in Western Europe, in other words unless the age-long antagonism between France and Germany were removed once and for all. We have followed the advice generously and rightly showered upon us from all sides since the end of the war. It was Robert Schuman who, in 1949 and 1950, laid the foundations of this new policy; his merit was by no means slight. It fell to General de Gaulle, who alone in France could take the responsibility – in concert with that great statesman Chancellor Adenauer – to place the final seal on that historic reconciliation by the Treaty of 21 January 1963 which marked a decisive stage for post-war Europe and, I think, for the Europe of the future.

Although Franco-German co-operation is a necessary condition of European unity it cannot be considered a sufficient condition. That, I think, is what our colleague Mr. Willy Brandt said here the other day. All the nations of Western Europe must be associated in the task and, in the first place, those whose geography, history or natural affinities lead them most easily to understand and collaborate with each other.

There is no other explanation for the creation of the European Economic Community which has been from the start, and still is, the basis of the economic organisation of Western Europe; one day, I hope, it will also be the basis of its political organisation, as France proposed to her partners in 1962.

Since 1 January 1959 the Common Market has been on the march. Who would deny that it has become an international reality of the first order? The customs union entered into force on 1 July last, 18 months ahead of schedule. The agricultural policy, which is the corner-stone of the whole building and the constant concern of governments, is to a large extent already established, even if many of the details have still to be finally settled and even if experience leads us to make adjustments and revisions. A start has only just been made in economic union, and its smooth progress depends only on the partners' will to act. In the international field, the Community confirmed its existence and unity at the important tariff negotiations known as the Kennedy Round, and contributed largely to the success of this unprecedented effort to liberalise international trade.

France, which, when the Rome Treaty was drafted, seemed hesitant and insisted on many saving clauses, has participated fully and wholeheartedly in its implementation: she has, and I think I can say this from experience, made a decisive contribution to the progress achieved.

To be sure, all this has not been achieved without spirited discussion, without difficulties and without crises. Nor is that surprising, considering it was a question of moving on from eloquent declarations and empty professions of faith to the hard realities of economic life. Is it not indeed the best proof that something was being done? When it came to dealing with actual facts and situations, the partners became aware of the conflicting interests which it was the duty of each to defend and which it was not always easy to reconcile. But that is not what counts. The important thing, in the last analysis, is to reach agreement. In the already long history of the Common Market I know of no case in which we have failed to find the necessary compromise solutions.

Is there, indeed, any more decisive proof of the success of this venture than the renown it has acquired, than the attractions it exercises, than the fact, in a word, that the problem of the widening of the Common Market has for years now been the topic of the day?

Passions have become too heated and attitudes too one-sided for this to be an appropriate topic to deal with at an anniversary ceremony such as this, which must be an occasion for looking for what unites us rather than for what divides us.

France's position, which has been clear for a long time, a very long time, is based on two considerations which it regards as complementary. The first is that new accessions are certainly legitimate and there is no doubt that the European Economic Community will not always remain what it is today. The second is that, if this first principle is accepted, the next step must be to study the possible conditions, consequences and stages of the decisions to be made. The utmost care must be taken not to jeopardise what already exists; but neither must we overlook the inevitable consequences of our acts. It is, as everyone knows, on the second of these considerations that we have, to our regret, failed so far to reach agreement.

The issue, of course, remains open; we know that talks are going on everywhere all the time. Many believe that official negotiations are bound to be resumed shortly. One thing, in any event, is inevitable when the hour of decisions, that is to say the hour of truth, comes, namely that everyone must accept his responsibilities and be prepared to reconcile his resolutions with his thoughts and his ulterior motives.

We often hear it said these days that Europe is passing through a difficult period. May I say, as I said a moment ago, with regard to the Common Market, that this is always the case when the time comes to move on from facile and flattering generalities to the hard facts of life and action. But why be always so pessimistic? Should we not rather be filled with hope when, as the Council of Europe is giving us the previous opportunity of doing now, we look back over the ground that has been covered since the start and review the progress accomplished? How can one fail to be struck by the extraordinary contrast between the gropings and hesitations of twenty years ago and the achievements of today, which are astonishing even if only partial and consequently full of promise for the future.

This is obviously true where the economy is concerned. Not only the Six of the Common Market, but the whole of Western Europe, form even now, if only potentially, a unit which we know is bound to grow in strength and take more and more concrete shape for the prosperity and progress of all.

There are already signs of this where policy is concerned. We French have hoped from the beginning that there would gradually emerge from among us a common will, not to say a policy, which, among the giants of this world, would enable our ancient nations to resume a role and to regain an influence which the follies of the past seemed, a quarter of a century ago, to have banished for ever to the realms of history. We used to speak, in this spirit, of a "European Europe". That goal is still a long way off, but the expression which used to provoke smiles, if it did not shock, has gradually penetrated the general consciousness. Numerous are those today who use it, in their turn, including those of our friends from whom, however, the present vicissitudes appear to divide us.

What could bear better witness to this beneficial trend than the words of the United States President on his return to Washington after his recent visit to Europe? I quote:

“General de Gaulle thinks that Europe is entitled to an independent position. And, frankly, I think so too.”

I do not think I can find a more fitting conclusion to the remarks which your kind invitation – for which thank you once again – has enabled me to make to your Assembly. It is a conclusion full of hope which, if we are to get away from the polemics, disputes and vicissitudes of daily life, seems to me justified by what we have already accomplished together, by the profound will of our nations to assert themselves and to work together, in a word, by the immense need apparent everywhere, and not least in our own country, for a Europe which will continue to give the world the irreplaceable benefit of its potential and its civilisation. May our successors, twenty years hence, be able, in their turn, to show a balance-sheet which fulfils all the hopes and aspirations of today.

(Applause)

Mr Olivier REVERDIN (Switzerland, President of the Assembly)*: Thank you, Mr. Prime Minister, and may I repeat once again how much we appreciate your finding the time, during these very difficult weeks, to come and address us as you have done.

We now have to continue with our Orders of the Day and we quite understand that you will leave us when it suits you best.