

DR. BODET IS EXPECTED TO SPEAK AT 3.30 P.M. ON  
MONDAY, 11th. APRIL, 1949.

11/4/49

Speaking at the first meeting of the United Kingdom National Commission for Unesco in Church House, Westminster, today (Monday), Dr. Jaime Torres Bodet, Director-General of UNESCO, said:-

I should like to thank you very warmly for having so kindly invited me to attend this meeting. It is almost three and a half years since I visited London. The last time I was in England, I came as Mexican delegate to the Conference which established Unesco. A great many things have happened since then. May I mention as one of them the fact that Unesco is in being? It has not yet become, of course, the powerful organization of whose world-wide influence some of us dreamed as we passed through the corridors of the Institute of Civil Engineers in the days of that Conference. However, the essential thing is that the structure of Unesco does exist. And, when we consider that its beginnings have coincided with the most difficult years, politically speaking, of our difficult century, we must pay our tribute to those who have proved by their imagination and steadfastness that they were worthy to be its leaders. In saying this, I am, of course, thinking especially of one of you: Dr. Huxley, whom I do not have the pleasure of seeing in Paris as often as I would like, but whose face I constantly recall - between two items of the programme of our Organization - his poet's eyes smiling through his scientist's spectacles at the sight of his successor's stumbling over the same obstacles of which he was always aware, but which he strove valiantly to overcome. And when valour was not enough, with that ardour in the face of reverses which marks both pioneer men and pioneer countries, that is to say, with sincerity and with the strength of humour.

I have learnt a great deal about that strength and that sincerity - and not only in regard to my predecessor but also in regard to all the Englishmen connected with Unesco. I am now thinking particularly of you, my dear Sir John - you who, as a member of the Executive Board, are always ready at the right moment with the word of wisdom, the word that brings the discussion back to the right channel, and that saves time for us all so that we can carry on our work profitably and faithfully.

Thus, England - in whose capital Unesco was born - has never for a moment ceased to be connected with its growth during the years which, echoing Goethe, we might call our "apprentice years". Sometimes, with a counsel, sometimes with a criticism, the voice of Great Britain guides us through all our troubles. As Director-General, I want to tell you sincerely that Unesco is equally grateful both for the counsels and for the criticism; stimulated by the former, we are instructed by the latter. And in both we find a valuable lesson, for we know that both counsels and criticism are inspired by genuine goodwill.

It would be a bad sign if we expected nothing but praise, when we ourselves are far from being satisfied with our work. We have undertaken an enormous programme. And our resources for carrying it out are so slender! If there is a fault to be found with

Unesco,



Unesco, it is, after all, a very creditable fault: that of an intense intellectual ambition.

It was first of all necessary to map out the domain which, sooner or later, should be Unesco's field of action. Hence the vastness of the programme drawn up at the Mexico City Conference and confirmed, in its main lines, by the Beirut Conference. That work was done. And those who did it, did it well. Our task now is not to retreat from the ambitious scale of the original programme, but modestly to single out from the wide field of projects the ones which seem to us to be of the greatest importance to culture, without for one moment losing sight of realities.

A task such as that which the United Nations have entrusted to Unesco does not yield its fruits in a short time. Not a few centuries were needed to allow even the idea of intellectual co-operation to prevail, in the minds of the élite, over the lust for spiritual domination. Where nations have needed centuries, how can we expect an inter-governmental institution to achieve, in the space of months, decisive and numerous successes? Therefore, in the work of determining which part of our programme was to be carried out within a particular time, we were guided by one overriding consideration: our prudence was not to imply any renunciation, and we were to give no one - least of all ourselves - the impression that questions deferred were questions abandoned. By this I mean that our criterion in making a choice will not be ease of execution. And between a spectacular project with no future and a simple, unimposing project likely to have useful results, we shall not hesitate. We shall choose the second.

Following this line of action, my first care as Director-General of Unesco, was to submit to the Executive Board a list of priorities, which the Board approved. I will not stop to repeat now the various items included in that list. I assume that you all know them. And I trust that, even if you are not in complete agreement with the details, you are at least in favour of the actual principle of selection which we have thus adopted. Such a selection was made necessary by circumstances, and was insistently advocated by the British delegation to the General Conference.

It would indeed be a mistake to abandon the vastness of our programme; but it would have been an even graver mistake not to realize that the best programmes are those that can be carried out. The peoples expect from our Organization more than a string of promises, however fine. In deciding on the priorities to which I have just alluded, we took into account, as I reported to the Executive Board, three considerations: first, which projects are likely to be of the greatest and most far-reaching benefit to the great masses? Second, which projects can best help the "leaders" in their task of serving the masses? And, finally, which projects have already reached such a stage in Unesco's work that to interrupt them would be tantamount to a costly failure and would be thought an incomprehensible lack of administrative continuity?

As was suggested by a member of the Executive Board at its meeting in February, we might propose that future General Conferences should lay down, with more authority than mine, an annual programme within the permanent programme we already have. This would enable the items in the Budget to be discussed with fuller knowledge. It would also avoid many administrative difficulties which cannot always be removed as we go along, and would lay down for the Secretariat a list of commitments that would otherwise be difficult to define. All these, however, are mere suggestions and the General Conference will decide as it thinks best.

/Nevertheless



Nevertheless it would be well, I feel, for you to reflect already upon these aspects of a problem which is not only a problem for me, but also a problem for your Commission and for all the National Commissions co-operating with Unesco. One of the tasks devolving upon these co-operating bodies is that of advising the delegations which attend the General Conference. To advise them properly, it is, I think, very important that the work of each Commission should be closely related to the priority programme fixed for 1949, so that when the time comes we may have the benefit of its experience. Without active National Commissions closely linked with the universities and with centres of culture in the country they represent, Unesco cannot accomplish its mission.

Wherever I go, people ask me, why is Unesco not in touch with this or that group of intellectual leaders, thinkers, artists and poets? Does its governmental status blind it to the importance of the private associations? You have told us yourself that the objective of Unesco is the good of man. Why, then, is there such a gulf between the average man and your Organisation?

I am bound to admit that questions like that disturb me profoundly. I feel that there is still an enormous gap between the activities of Unesco and the needs, hopes and fears of that average man, that man in the street, of whose destiny we who work in Unesco must always be thinking. On the other hand, I ask in my turn: is it not for the National Commissions in each country to help us fill that immense gap? In 1945, when we were discussing the foundations of our Institution, we all realized that the strength - but also the weakness - of its structure lay in its necessarily official character. We therefore pressed for the establishment of National Commissions, which would form a bridge between the governments and non-governmental cultural groups, and through which a fresh and invigorating breath of new life - the breath of the realities of life - might continually be infused into Unesco's work.

Each time that I address an institution like yours, I put to its members the same request: Help us to make sure that Unesco does not become stiff in the joints before it has grown up. In the battle we have to wage against ignorance and incomprehension, you must be our reserves and yet, in a sense, you must be our vanguard, too. You represent, on the one hand, the stablest factor in a splendid tradition; whilst, on the other hand, you also represent for us the best means of knowing the cultural wishes of your country and of spreading throughout your country Unesco's gospel of brotherhood and peace. If this twofold function is anywhere indispensable, it is in a country where, as in yours, high ideals are combined with sound critical sense; a country where individual liberty has reached its highest development and where the large number of intellectual centres calls for an intense effort of inter-communication.

You have done much for Unesco. And Unesco expects much of you, particularly if we consider the obstacles that stand in our way.

They are of all kinds. First, political obstacles. Unesco wants, of course, to be above politics. But politics are indisputably there, with their conflicting interests and passions; and through them Unesco is often reduced to playing the part of a silent witness. Then, material obstacles. Whilst culture requires increasing numbers of exchanges and efficient communications, economic problems are erecting / barriers .....



barriers between States, allowing books to get no further than the frontiers, stopping travel for research workers and holding up the transport of research equipment, and fixing quotas for ideas as well as for goods. Lastly, moral obstacles. These are not the least; they are indeed the most serious, for they now arouse neither astonishment nor indignation. The people have suffered too long from spoken and written lies. How can we now ask them to be suddenly enthusiastic over ideas according to which they must redouble their efforts to bring about, at some distant date, a state of reasonable and just security?

If these new demands are to be made upon them, Unesco must prove that it is not an abstraction, a platform for speeches, an international trade mark for mass-produced projects. But is Unesco alone to provide that proof? Is not the whole realm of the intellect, and its ability to contribute to the emancipation of the peoples, in fact, called in question? For Unesco is not only an international organisation situated in Paris, at the Hotel Majestic. Unesco is not merely a Secretariat, an Executive Board and a series of Conferences. It is not an administrative entity developing in accordance with the laws of some unacceptable intellectual autarchy. Unesco knows that, by itself, it can neither produce nor consume anything. Everything that it gives it has first to receive. Its activity would be absurd if it were ever unfortunate enough to be cut off from its living springs, that is, from the various spiritual resources of its Member States contributing to the promotion of friendship between nations and sympathy between cultures. You, gentlemen, are yourselves part of Unesco. Without you and without the Universities, writers, professors and scientists of the forty-six countries now taking part in its work, there would be no reason for Unesco, and Unesco would not exist.

I have not mentioned all these obstacles with the idea of damping your enthusiasm. On the contrary, of all the qualities of the English people, the one I admire most is its ability to rise above danger and even to find a stimulus in obstacles that have to be overcome. In the case of our Organization, all endeavour is commendable, because the goal that we pursue is truly worthy of all endeavour. If we should fail, the international system, which we began to build up even before the fighting in the recent war had ceased, would lose that human value which gave to the victory of the United Nations its finest meaning: freedom and faith in progress. But we shall not fail, for too many hopes are placed in Unesco. I can still hear the voice of your Prime Minister, Mr. Attlee, when, at the opening of the 1945 Conference, he spoke these inspiring words:

"Today, the peoples of the world are 'islands shouting at each other over seas of misunderstanding'. They do not understand each other's history, each other's ways of living, each other's way of thinking. The better they understand each other, the more they will realize how much they have in common and why and how much they differ, and the less prone they will be to take up arms against each other. 'Know thyself', said the old proverb. 'Know your neighbour', we say today. And the whole world is our neighbour".

When I remember these words, and when I see statesmen like those I greet here with deep respect, and whose very presence here is proof of the close interest of the British authorities in Unesco; when, in a word, I see you, gentlemen, and talk with you, I cannot doubt of the future of the work that has been entrusted to us.

Britain stood godmother to our infant Organization. She offered us, for its cradle, her capital, a city preserved in the tragic days of the war by the awe-inspiring endurance of a gallant people. Every birth is a portent. Unesco's birth, and the manner of it, bids us to persevere.