



Parliamentary Book Shelf

An Assembly for Europe: The Council of Europe's Parliamentary Assembly, 1948-1989, by **Bruno Haller**, Council of Europe Publishing, 2006

This book by a former Secretary General tells the story of the origins and growth of the first pan-European assembly of parliamentarians. It is a book for popular consumption, a book for the uninitiated. As a Council of Europe publication, it takes an over(t)ly rosy view of the institution's development and present status. Though billed as a book about the assembly, it actually focuses a lot on the Council of Europe as a whole as well as events in Europe more generally. The author also cannot forebear from numerous references to the post-Cold War era, despite the stated intention for there to be a second volume considering this period.

The book notes that the creation of the Council of Europe and the significance of the assembly came among the immediate post-war aspirations for greater integration in Europe. These hopes were soon dashed in the intergovernmental stalemate of the Council of Europe, though they promptly reappeared in the European Coal and Steel Community and subsequently the European Economic Community).

While the author lauds the various achievements of the Council of Europe, particularly the European Covenant and Court of Human Rights, as well as encouragement of cooperation on cultural issues, human rights, youth, and science and technology, there is no hiding the disappointment that the bigger European project never really took off, at least not as the integrationist founders of the Council of Europe had hoped.

Though it is now called the Parliamentary Assembly, it is still functionally a consultative framework. The title parliamentary is an indication of its membership, not its powers, which are limited whether one is thinking of either oversight or control. Though you won't find the argument here, the innovation of other institutions in Europe is at least an implicit and occasionally explicit criticism of the failures or limits of the Council of Europe and its assembly. Even before the completion of the Eastern enlargement, the EU's European Parliament was widely regarded as Europe's Parliament. It does at least have some measure of parliamentary power and influence over decision-making, albeit circumscribed.

The Council of Europe and the Parliamentary Assembly have survived nonetheless, partly from being useful in specific sectors and

partly by taking on new roles, today being the conscience of Europe, through the European Covenant of Human Rights, and being in the vanguard of the enlargement of Europe. With direct election of MEPs to the European Parliament, the Council of Europe's Parliamentary Assembly is the major venue where national parliamentarians can discuss issues of common interest to Europeans.

Canada has been an Observer since 1997 and the regular exchanges of parliamentarians serves a purpose of sharing best practices on a range of issues to do with human rights and culture. Were the nations of the EU able to agree on the incorporation of these issues into the EU framework, there would be little need for the Council of Europe or Canada's modest participation with it. Because this remains a very distant prospect, the Council of Europe's Parliamentary Assembly may have been superseded but it has yet to be transcended, and the exchanges retain their value to Canada's MPs as a source of information and occasionally even inspiration.

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