

# EUROPEAN LEAGUE FOR ECONOMIC CO-OPERATION

*The Origins of the European League  
for Economic Co-operation  
(ELEC)*

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~~E.L.E.C.~~

## I. THE ORIGINS OF ELEC IN 1946

As with so many institutions and organisations, it is not easy to trace the exact date of the foundation of ELEC. As in the case of almost all associations, preliminary talks among individuals take place, but the date of foundation becomes clearer when a governing body actually meets.

ELEC's origins go back to the autumn of 1946 (1) when the founding fathers of ELEC, Paul van Zeeland, former Belgian Prime Minister and living in the war years in London and Joseph Retinger, former Polish political adviser to General Sikorski, Prime Minister of Poland in exile in London, took the initiative to form a steering committee with the aim to launch "A Continental Association for the solution of the continental problem of Europe" (2).

Paul van Zeeland represented Belgium, Joseph Retinger Poland and, as representative of the Netherlands they found Pieter Kerstens, former Dutch Minister of Trade, Industry and Shipping in the war years in London. It is this triumvirate that played a decisive role in structuring ELEC.

Both van Zeeland and Retinger - who knew each other, as well as Kerstens, from the war years in London - published articles in 1946 on the co-operation of Europe, van Zeeland under the title "La Belgique et l'Occident européen" and Retinger "The European continent". Van Zeeland focussed the European co-operation on a nucleus of France, Great Britain, the Netherlands and Belgium. Retinger appeared afraid of continental Europe becoming a playing field for the Anglo-Saxons or the Russian Empire: "It would be possible for the smaller of the Western Continental Powers to initiate consultation and upon this framework a unified Continent might be built". These different accents on the co-operation in Europe may confuse the reader as it might have confused Kerstens in writing prematurely about a Continental Association dealing with continental problems. Van Zeeland's opinion got the overhand; however in the beginning Great Britain, as well as Canada and the USA were only invited as observers at the same time obtaining their "bénédiction".

1) See Michel Dumoulin "Les débuts de la Ligue Européenne de Coopération Economique" (1987).

2) See letter of Kerstens to the Prime Minister and Foreign Minister of the Netherlands, 14 October 1946 (Archives Kerstens).



The renewed contacts between Retinger and Kerstens must have taken place in June 1946, as on the 23rd of June 1946. Kerstens sent to Retinger a letter with a written statement, part of his curriculum vitae (1).

The 17th of October 1946 (2), the three founding fathers, together with Ambassador Dupuy of Canada and Mr Willy Faulx of Belgium, Secretary of Paul van Zeeland, met more or less officially for the first time in Maison Flamande in Brussels - residence of Paul van Zeeland - and decided to form an independent association with the aim to restore Europe under the name of "Association indépendante d'action européenne".

A partition of tasks between van Zeeland, Retinger and Kerstens was decided upon to contact government leaders and other personalities to form local committees in other countries, but only after approval of the government of those countries.

On 17 November 1946 (1), a note on the "Independent Association of European Action" explained the aims of the Association now under this adapted name. The Association is independent and does not accept any subsidies or instructions from any government. The Association intended to call an international Congress in April or May 1947 (however it was never held). National committees would be established first on the European continent.

The note ended: "The founders of the Association are most anxious to explain their point of view and their aims to the British Prime Minister and they suggest that an interview be granted by Mr C. Attlee" to van Zeeland, Kerstens and Retinger about the middle of December 1946.

Kerstens promised to find premises for the Secretariat-General in Amsterdam or The Hague. In the exchange of letters between Kerstens and the Dutch Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs (3), the latter were very much concerned about the position of the Soviet Union. They feared that the founding of the Continental Association to which the Soviet Union was not invited, might result in unwelcome action against the Soviet Union by the

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(1) Archives ELEC, Brussels

(2) Archives Kerstens

(3) See relevant letters dated 23 and 26 October, 7 November and 28 November 1946 (Archives Kerstens).

See Liggins op.cit., page 506 on the cautious attitude of the Dutch towards European Unity.

Anglo-Saxon world. Establishing the headquarters of the Association in the Netherlands might lead to special objection against the Netherlands by the Soviet Union. Therefore the Prime Minister advised against the establishment in the Netherlands. So the Secretariat-General stayed until 1949 in London with Dr. Retinger as acting General-Secretary.

In December 1946 (1), Adolf Berle (former US Under State Secretary) accepted the chairmanship of the American Committee - which never gained ground and was disbanded after the Marshall Plan was launched - of the proposed European Action League, as van Zeeland called it.

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(1) See letter van Zeeland to Berle, 6 December 1946 (Archives ELEC Brussels)



## II. OTHER EUROPEAN MOVEMENTS IN 1946-1947

ELEC was in 1946-1947 not the only European movement. We mention, beginning with ILEC/ELEC, the following other movements (1):

- 1) Independent League for European Cooperation (17 October 1946)
- 2) Union Européenne des Fédéralistes with Chairman Dr. H. Brugmans of Amsterdam. This union was a merger of various small groups in Europe (21 September 1946)
- 3) United Europe Movement, an initiative of Winston Churchill who launched his European ideas in a speech for the University of Zurich on 19 September 1946 and later in the Albert Hall on 14 May 1947. The French Herriot Committee can be regarded as a branch of the U.E.M.
- 4) Nouvelles Equipes Internationales, founded in March 1947 and grouping Christian-democrats.
- 5) Mouvement Socialiste pour les Etats Unis d'Europe founded in 1947 in London, with André Philip as its first chairman.

On the 11th November 1947, these organisations founded the "Coordination Committee of the Movements for European Unity" (President Duncan Sandys) and they together took the initiative to the European Congress held in May 1948 in the Hague, which was opened by Winston Churchill and Princess Juliana.

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(1) See a.o. "L'Idee d'Union Fédérale Européenne", by Lucien de Sainte Lorette (1955) and W. Lipgens "A History of European Integration" (1982).

## III. ILEC/ELEC IN 1947

In a memorandum of 16 January 1947 (1) to Kerstens, Paul van Zeeland gave an account of his visit together with Retinger to London in relation with the project of the creation of a "Ligue Indépendante de Collaboration Européenne" (visit the 11th and 13th January 1947). In a lunch with Sir Stafford Cripps and a meeting with Prime Minister Attlee the search for a president of an eventual British Section of ELEC was discussed, a president who must be persona grata in the eyes of the British Government.

On the 15th February 1947 (1), van Zeeland paid a second visit (the first was on 8 November 1946 (2)) to Mr Bidault at the Quai d'Orsay and discussed with him the creation of a French national committee of the Ligue Indépendante de Coopération Economique. As candidates for the presidency were mentioned:

- 1) Blum
  - 2) Monnet
  - 3) Herriot
  - 4) Boncour.
- Suggestions for the Secretary-General should follow. Bidault would inform President Ramadier. Relations with Russia and the role in France of the communist party were discussed.

On the 16th and 17th February 1947 (1) van Zeeland met Mr Bech and the Prime Minister of Luxembourg and discussed the formation of a Luxembourg National Committee under the eventual chairmanship of Mr. Konsbruck.

On the 2nd and 3rd of March 1947 (1), van Zeeland, Kerstens, Retinger, Minister Konsbruck and also Messrs Leemans, Gillijns and Faulx met in the Hague in order to agree on the Préambule and the Memorandum préliminaire of ILEC and to take decisions on the forthcoming ILEC Congress in Luxembourg in June (this congress was never held). Relations with Russia (sending a letter to Molotov provided Mr Dulles found this opportune) and with the Churchill-committee (asking a letter of Mr Churchill to explain the differences between his United Europe Committee and ILEC) were discussed. A British ILEC Committee was not yet formed, mention was made that Lord Beveridge had accepted the presidency of this Committee.

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(1) Archives Kerstens, also in most cases Archives ELEC Brussels.

(2) Archives Paul van Zeeland



On the 14th of March 1947 (1), the Préambule and the Memorandum préliminaire became public, followed by a press communiqué on the 24th of March. In it the first written statement of the ideas, aims and methods of the new organisation were mentioned (2).

On the 15th of March (1), van Zeeland, Kerstens, Retinger, Leemans, Gillijns and Faulx met with Duncan Sandys in Brussels to talk about the relation between ILEC and the Churchill-Committee as well to speak about organizational matters of the envisaged ILEC Congress. There was another meeting in New York from the 1st till 3rd April 1947 to take contact with the American section.

On May 8th, 1947 (3) a meeting, probably the first, of chairmen of national committees of ILEC was held in London. Present were: van Zeeland (in the chair), Retinger (Secretary General), Major General Sir Colin Gubbins (Secretary), Major Beddington-Behrens (active for the British section), Kerstens (initiator of ELEC, the Dutch ELEC section only was founded the 10th January 1949), Mr Konsbruck (President Luxembourg section).

Absent were: Berle (President of the USA section) and Motz (President of the Belgian section and President of the Belgian Liberal Party), visited already on 20 December 1946 by van Zeeland, but thanks to socialist opposition, the Belgian section only was formed officially in September 1948.

There was no mention of a French ELEC section, as on the May 8th, 1947, this had not yet been founded.

Sir Harold Butler (former head of the ILO, International Labor Organisation) had accepted the chairmanship of the British Committee (after the refusal of Lord Beveridge) on the 12th of April and was starting to organise his committee with the help of Major Beddington Behrens, who later became himself President of the British ELEC section.

Van Zeeland had had lunch with Winston Churchill. Sir Harold Butler should work out a scheme for liaison with Mr Churchill's committee: ELEC focusing on economic matters, the

(1) Archives Kerstens, also in most cases Archives ELEC Brussels

(2) Lippens, who gives an inaccurate account of the founding of ILEC - he did not consult the ELEC Brussels, van Zeeland and Kerstens Archives - regards the 7th of March as the foundation date of the League; de Sainte Lorette who did not consult foreign archives in 1955, is even inaccurate in stating a French and British role in the foundation of ELEC.

(3) Archives ELEC, Brussels

Churchill committee on political. The date for the ELEC congress was postponed to September - as mentioned this was never held -, there were draft statutes of the League in discussion and Sir Harold Butler asked if it was necessary to retain the word "Independent" in the League's title. The International Secretariat-General was in London at that time and lead by Dr. Retinger and General Gubbins.

As it was very difficult to find a French President for a French Section of ELEC, the existant French "Comité d'Action Economique et Douanière" became in June 1947 (1) the French section of ELEC with as chairman D. Serruys (who died in 1950 and was succeeded by Edmond Giscard d'Estaing) and Lucien de Sainte Lorette as Secretary-General.

We now quote Lippens:

"Secretary of State Marshall's offer (beginning June 1947) gave the new group an ideal opportunity to submit concrete proposals for economic co-operation, and it was quick to respond by organizing meetings. On 20 June 1947 van Zeeland, Retinger, and the seven most active members of the London group produced a memorandum urging the necessity of accepting Marshall's offer, replying to it with a co-ordinated European plan and setting up a "European Planning Board" for the purpose of combining the most urgent national needs into a single list and planning for the removal of the trade and customs barriers that were partly responsible for Europe's troubles" (2).

"The memorandum was further discussed in Paris on 30 June at a meeting at which all four national sections were represented (The British and French with six members each); the references to free trade and the need to approach European unity by stages were strengthened, and the text was then sent to all European

(1) See Michel Dumoulin "Les débuts de la Ligue Européenne de Coopération Economique" (1987)

(2) Independent League for European Cooperation. Action to be taken on Marshall's offer: conclusion of a working meeting held in London on 20.6.1947 by van Zeeland, Retinger, Sir Harold Butler, E. Beddington-Behrens, Lord Layton, H. Macmillan, MP, Sir Henry Price, Sir Arthur Salter, MP, and H.V. Tewson (Trades Union Congress) in EM Archives, Bruges, ELEC documents (ten typed pages). The draft memorandum (pp 8-10) was preceded by a discussion of "Reasons for the Marshall's offer", "What are Europe's requirements?" "Removal of economic barriers", and "The difficulties that might arise from lack of goodwill by Russia and France".



governments who were members of the UN. The memorandum had a decided effect on governments as the first expression of opinion by an independent body of experts in the light of the new situation in Europe". (1)

#### IV. ELEC IN 1948-1950

We continue to quote Lipgens:

"The existence and function of the small but highly qualified association of experts, which in June 1948 presented itself for legal registration in the Moniteur Belge under the more accurate name, already considered in Paris, of Ligue Européenne de Coopération Economique (European League for Economic Co-operation), were thus assured.

Together with the memorandum on Marshall's offer the League drafted economic resolutions and had the chairmanship of the Economic Committee for the European Congress in The Hague in the Spring 1948 and, a year later, all the documentation needed for the economic conference of the European Movement at Westminster. The first of its series of publications, in 1949, was entitled *Propositions relatives à la convertibilité des monnaies européennes*.

The effectiveness of the ELEC consisted in the fact that its members were recognized experts, occupying positions of responsibility, and that they concentrated strictly on a particular aspect of the problem of unity, viz the promotion of economic co-operation in a given situation".

In 1950 the German section of ELEC was formed. Chairman of this section became the banker Hermann Abs. The Italian section founded by its President Enrico Falk was also formed in 1950.

"From 1950 when the Belgian industrialist Baron Boël became Chairman of the Conseil Central (1) valuable use was made of a system of supranational commissions on specific questions, staffed by experts from the national committees, so that these questions were discussed ab initio from a European and not from a merely national point of view". In 1950 special attention was paid to the Schuman Plan.

(1) Pieter Kerstens preceded him in 1950 as President of ELEC; see minutes of the Assemblée Générale extraordinaire of 10 November 1949 (Archives ELEC Brussels)

(1) I.L.E.C., Paris Meeting 30.6.1947... Summary of proceedings (sixteen typed pages), with final text of the memorandum (four pages) signed by: Senator Paul van Zeeland, President, Joseph Retinger, Secretary General, Sir Harold Butler, Chairman of the British National Committee, Daniel Serruys, Chairman of the French National Committee, Guili Kohnsbruck, Chairman of the Luxembourg National Committee, Senator Pieter Kerstens, chairman of the Dutch National Committee, Senator Roger Morz, chairman of the Belgian Committee, EM Archives, Bruges, ELEC documents. Other participants were, from Britain, C. Gubbins, E. Beddington-Behrens, Lord Layton, and H. Macmillan; from France, Charles-Roux, J. Chastenet, E. Giscard d'Estaing, Paul Naudin and L. de Sainte Lorette. According to the minutes (Paris Meeting 30.6.1947, p. 14) it was agreed to make contact with other pro-European associations, and to avoid misunderstanding in this connection, H. Butler proposed that the League should at least introduce the word "Economic" into its title.



## V. WHERE TO FIND THE HISTORICAL MATERIAL- LITERATURE, ARCHIVES, ETC..

As there is a growing interest in the history of the European Co-operation, it is of great importance to find the relevant sources. The original sources are the correspondence between the institutions/organisations and persons involved, records of their meetings, yearly reports, publications and the like (1). We find the original sources, if they kept them, in the archives of the organisation and in the personal archives of the people involved. In many cases these archives have been trusted to official record-keeping institutions, like state archives. Recently however historians and groups of historians or even the European institutions themselves are writing their history and in this way the literature about the history of the European Co-operation is growing. Let us see where the historic material of ELEC can be found.

### 1) Original sources of ELEC

- There are extensive archives of ELEC International and ELEC Belgium at the Secretariat-General in Brussels from 1946 up till now. In some cases correspondence with national sections have been kept, so it is possible in these cases to trace part of the history of a particular section.
- The founder Paul van Zeeland had his personal archives deposited at the Archives Générales du Royaume, Brussels.
- Retinger archives are to be found in the Polish Library in London. They contain the personal archives of the founder Retinger.
- The founder Pieter Kerstens had his personal archives deposited at the Rijksarchief in The Hague.
- The ELEC Dutch section has his archives deposited at the Rijksarchief in The Hague as part of the extensive Archives of the Europese Beweging in Nederland (European Movement) and Europese Federalisten (European Federalists), dating from 1946-1987

(1) Correspondence is a two-way street. One letter may be found in two archives viz. the one of the sender and the one of the receiver.

- European Movement Archives, Bruges, see ELEC documents
- Unclassified archives of the British Section of ELEC were at the estate of Lady Rhys-Williams, former Secretary-General of the British Section.

### 2. Literature about the history of ELEC and European Integration in general

- The most reliable study on the origins of ELEC has been written by Prof. Michel Dumoulin in the Revue Res Publica, n° 1, 1987 and is entitled "Les débuts de la Ligue Européenne de Coopération Economique.(1946-1949).
- Prof. Michel Dumoulin and Anne-Myriam Durrieux published in 1993 : La Ligue Européenne de Coopération Economique - 1946-1981".
- W. Lippens, "A history of European Integration; 1945-1950" (Oxford 1982), with a chapter on "Foundation of the European League for Economic Cooperation", which is however not always accurate.
- John Pomian, "J. Retinger, Memoirs of an Eminence Grise", 1972
- In his booklet "L'idée d'Union Fédérale Européenne", L. de Sainte Lorette draws attention, next to ELEC to the various European organisations up till 1955.
- ELEC Brochures 1947-1957, 1946-1960, etc..
- R.T. Griffiths (ed.), "The Netherlands and the Integration of Europe 1945-1957", Amsterdam, 1990 with a special chapter on "Guide to the Dutch Central Government Archives".

Rotterdam, February 1995



# APPENDIX

## I.- ELEC IN BRIEF (1946-1951)

### *Date of founding:*

17 October 1946, Maison Flamande, Brussels

### *Founding fathers:*

Paul van Zeeland (Belgium)  
Joseph Retinger (Poland) and  
Pieter Kerstens (Netherlands).

### *National sections:*

- American Committee, Dec. 1946,  
President A. Berle jr (1)
- British Committee, May 1947,  
President Sir Harold Butler(2)
- French Committee, June 1947,  
President Daniel Serruys (3)
- Belgian Committee, February 1948,  
President Roger Motz
- Luxembourg Committee, 1949,  
President Guillaume Konsbruck
- Dutch Committee, January 1949,  
President Pieter Kerstens (4)
- Italian Committee, 1950,  
President Enrico Falk
- German Committee, July 1950,  
President Hermann J. Abs.
- Austrian Committee, 1951

### *PRESIDENTS:*

Paul van Zeeland	1946-1949 (Président d'honneur after 1949)
Pieter Kerstens	1950
René Boël	1951-1981

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- (1) Disbanded in June 1947 after the founding of the Marshall Plan  
(2) Succeeded by Major Beddington Behrens in 1951  
(3) After his death in 1950 succeeded by Edmond Giscard d'Estaing  
(4) Succeeded in 1950 by P.R. Bentz van den Berg

### *GENERAL SECRETARIES:*

Joseph Retinger	1946-1949 (1)
Louis Camu	1950
Lucien Sermon	1951-1962
Yvonne de Wergifosse	1962-1988.

## II. VARIOUS NAMES OF ELEC

- Continental Association for the solution of the continental problems of Europe - 14 October 1946 (2)
- Independent Association of European Action - 17 October 1946 and 17 November 1946 (3)
- European Action League - 6 December 1946 (3)
- European Association - 6 January 1947 (3)
- Ligue Indépendante de Collaboration Européenne - 16 January 1947 (3)
- Ligue Indépendante de Coopération Européenne - 18 February 1947 (2)
- Ligue Européenne de Coopération Economique, proposed by Sir Harold Butler on the 3rd June 1948 (3), adopted in 1949 (3).

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- (1) Retinger became Secretary General of the European Movement and was together with Prince Bernhard of The Netherlands, co-founder of the Bilderberg-meetings.  
(2) Archives Kerstens  
(3) Archives ELEC, Brussels.