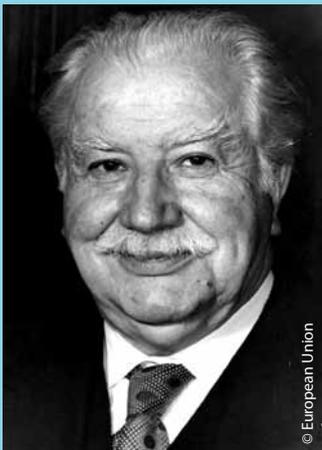


Joseph Bech: how a small country can play a crucial role in European integration



Joseph Bech 1887- 1975

Joseph Bech was the Luxembourgish politician that helped set up the European Coal and Steel Community in the early 1950s and a leading architect behind European integration in the later 1950s.

It was a joint memorandum from the Benelux countries that led to the convening of the Messina Conference in June 1955, paving the way for the European Economic Community.

Bech's experience of living in Luxembourg during the two World Wars made him understand how powerless such a small state could be, isolated between two powerful neighbours. This led him to realise the importance of internationalism and cooperation between states if a stable and prosperous Europe were to be achieved. He helped to set up the Benelux union between Belgium, the Netherlands and Luxembourg, an experience which proved to be of great benefit when the European institutions were developed. The process of forming this union between the three small states has since been considered a prototype for the European Union itself.

Early life and rise through politics

Joseph Bech was born on 17 February 1887 in Diekirch, Luxembourg. He studied law in Fribourg in Switzerland and in Paris, France. After graduation in 1914, he set up a law practice and, that same year, was elected to the Luxembourgian Chamber of Deputies for the newly-founded Christian Party.

In 1921 Bech became Minister of Internal Affairs and Education. In 1926 he became Prime Minister and Minister of External Affairs and Agriculture. It was during his period as Prime Minister between 1926 and 1936 that the global financial crisis struck. Bech understood the vital importance that exports play in a country's economy. As Luxembourg's main trading partner was Germany, the country was very dependent on its neighbour. As a result Bech tried to limit Luxembourg's economic dependence on Germany as much as possible. It was in this attempt to expand markets for the Luxembourgish steel industry that he negotiated for the first time for closer economic cooperation and a customs

union with Belgium, and later with the Netherlands. These were essential efforts that contributed to the forming of the Benelux union during the Second World War.

The Second World War

When Nazi Germany invaded Luxembourg on 10 May 1940, Bech was forced into exile with a number of other ministers and the Head of State, Grand Duchess Charlotte, forming a government-in-exile in London. It was in his capacity as Minister of Foreign Affairs that he signed the Benelux Treaty in 1944. His experience in creating an economic union promoting the free movement of workers, capital, services, and goods in the region, would later prove useful in setting up the European Economic Community.

Throughout his career Bech remained marked by the memory of the First World War and the crisis that followed wherein Luxembourg was in danger of being swallowed up by its neighbours. This feeling of powerlessness led to his support for strong internationalism.

He therefore represented Luxembourg in all multilateral negotiations during and after the Second World War, and encouraged his compatriots to accept the accession of the Grand Duchy in the international organisations that were created: Benelux in 1944, The United Nations in 1946 and NATO in 1949.

The European Coal and Steel Community

On May 9 1950, Bech was the Foreign Minister of Luxembourg. Aware of the need for his country to bring its neighbours together through economic and political agreements, it was with enthusiasm that he welcomed the proposal put forward on that date by his French counterpart, Robert Schuman, to create a European Coal and Steel Community. He knew that this would give Luxembourg the opportunities it needed and give the country a place and a voice in Europe. A further boost to Luxembourg's standing in Europe was given when he managed to achieve that the headquarters of the High Authority of the Coal and Steel Community be located in Luxembourg.

As a next step, Bech supported the plans for a European Defence Community. They were rejected by France in 1954, but that was far from the end of European integration.

The Messina Conference

From 1 to 3 June 1955, Joseph Bech chaired the Messina Conference which later led to the Treaty of Rome, forming the European Economic Community. The focus of this Conference was a memorandum submitted by the three Benelux countries, including Joseph Bech as the representative of Luxembourg. The memorandum combined French and Dutch plans offering both to undertake new activities in the fields of

transport and energy, especially nuclear, and a general Common Market, with focus on the need for a common authority with real powers. On the basis of experience with the Benelux and the Coal and Steel Community, the three Foreign Ministers proposed a plan, that further developed on an idea put forward by Dutch Minister Beyen, which recommended economic cooperation as the way to achieve European unification. This 'Spaak Report', named after Belgian Minister Spaak, Chairman of the Committee that had drafted it, became the basis for the Intergovernmental Conference which drafted the treaties on a common market and atomic energy cooperation, and which were signed in Rome on 25 March 1957.

In 1959, after having held this post since 1929, Bech gave up the portfolio of Foreign Affairs. From 1959 to 1964, he chaired the House of Representatives before leaving the political scene at the age of 77. He died 11 years later, in 1975. For his role in the unification of Europe, we now consider him one of the founding fathers of the European Union. He provided an excellent example of how a small country such as Luxembourg can play a crucial role on the international stage.



Bech with a cine-camera, enjoying a moment of relaxation at the Messina Conference in 1955.