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Editorial

twenty-five years ago...

atlantic city

Among the historic events which stand out as landmarks in the career of the Union over more than a hundred years, the most striking are the big conferences which profoundly changed its structure to bring it into line with advances in technique.

With the passage of time we now have quite a number of anniversaries to remind us of these events and of the rich lessons to be drawn from history. In this respect 1972 is an exceptional year.

It was in 1947, 25 years ago on 16 May last, that the first International Radio Conference since the Second World War was held at Atlantic City, New Jersey, in the United States of America. From 2 July onwards it was accompanied by a Plenipotentiary Conference and, from 16 August, by an International Conference on High Frequency Broadcasting.

For many now active in international telecommunications, this reminder may appear as just another anniversary. The Atlantic City Conferences, however, were of such capital importance for the Union that we would do well to pause a moment and look back at the problems which were upmost in the minds of ITU Members in 1947 and to see just how significantly the decisions of these Conferences influenced both the structure of the Union and its methods of work.

One has some difficulty today in coming to grips with the ideas which were dominant in 1947. The world was living in a period of post-war reconstruction. A devastating war had affected, either directly or indirectly, most of mankind and there existed a powerful current to improve international cooperation in all fields through the United Nations and its specialized agencies. There was a very strong movement towards full

independence among the colonial countries. The development of aviation had greatly contributed to shrinking the apparent size of our planet and it was natural that there should be an upsurge of international communications.

Since the Madrid and Cairo Conferences in 1932 and 1938, meetings of the International Consultative Committees (CCIF, CCIT and CCIR) had been the only forum for international telecommunication activities. For obvious reasons it had been necessary to abandon the plans to hold International Telecommunication Conferences at Rome in the spring of 1942.

In other words, the need was felt in all fields for a general tidying up and bringing up-to-date of the various texts and regulations. Naturally it was not an easy job. The Radio Conference, planned to last for three months, went on for four and a half months. Similarly, the Plenipotentiary Conference, planned for six weeks, lasted twice as long. It would certainly have lasted even longer if the representatives of China, the United States of America, France, the United Kingdom and the USSR had not met at Moscow for three weeks, from 28 September 1946, to carry out preparatory work to provide the delegations at Atlantic City with general directives in time for them to form a reasoned opinion on these texts.

On 28 and 29 October 1946, moreover, an informal broadcasting conference met in

Paris to prepare the ground for the Conference on High Frequency Broadcasting that was convened one year later at Atlantic City.

As already mentioned, it was on 16 May 1947, at the Ambassador Hotel in Atlantic City, that the first plenary meeting was opened in the presence of 76 delegations, and it was not until 2 October that the plenipotentiaries of 72 countries were able to sign the Final Acts of the International Telecommunication Conferences of Atlantic City, namely the Convention, the General Regulations, the Final Protocol, the Radio Regulations, the Additional Radio Regulations and a number of highly important documents such as Additional Protocols, Resolutions, Recommendations, Opinions and the Agreement concluded between the United Nations and the ITU.

* * *

As far as telecommunication operations were concerned, things had greatly changed since the Union Members had met in 1938 in Cairo.

The installations of many countries had been seriously damaged by the war. There had been great technical advances and much of the old remaining equipment was obsolete. The needs of the warring armies had resulted in the manufacture, on a hitherto unknown

scale, of telecommunication equipment, especially for radiocommunications.

Radiocommunication for very practical reasons had become the centre of interest. Radio provides direct communication between two distinct points without any intermediary equipment, and it is therefore a necessity for long-distance communications when ground-based facilities are either destroyed or otherwise impractical.

Technically the world of Atlantic City was very different from the one we know today. Long-distance submarine telephone cables had yet to be laid, satellite communications were still in the realm of science fiction, the transistor had not yet been invented and VHF/UHF transhorizon transmissions had not got beyond the research stage.

All the interest centred on the frequency bands between 3 and 30 MHz which allowed long-distance radio transmissions. The efficient international use of these frequency bands was therefore one of the major concerns of the time, so much so that over the years this has tended to distract attention from some of the very important decisions which were taken by the Atlantic City Conferences.

The 1932 Madrid Convention, which was then in force, left many things open to doubt, perhaps the most fundamental of which concerned the conditions for membership of the Union. Under the Madrid Convention

the government of any country could become a Member of the Union provided that it adhered to at least one of the Regulations annexed to the Convention (Telegraph, Telephone and Radio Regulations). The Union furthermore had no administrative continuity as there did not exist any body which could act on behalf of Members in the interval between Conferences.

The Atlantic City Conferences therefore had to correct these shortcomings and to make other changes in order to provide the Union with the type of organization necessary for promoting the international co-ordination of telecommunications.

* * *

After twenty-five years, it is perhaps not so important to recapitulate what each of the three Atlantic City Conferences* did, but it is interesting to highlight some of the most significant innovations introduced.

A. Fundamental constitutional changes

1. The composition of the Union was clearly laid down in the Atlantic City

* 1. International Radio Conference, 16 May—2 October 1947
2. Plenipotentiary Conference, 2 July—2 October 1947
3. International Conference on High Frequency Broadcasting, 16 August—27 September 1947

Convention, in terms which are substantially the same as in the present Convention.

2. The purposes of the Union were clearly set out for the first time.
3. A preamble was introduced stating that the intention of the plenipotentiaries was to ensure "the effectiveness of telecommunication"; a similar preamble had been included in the 1865 Convention but had disappeared with the Madrid Convention in 1932.
4. The principle of the obligatory nature of the Regulations was inserted in the Atlantic City Convention whereas, under the Madrid Convention, a Member had the right to accept or reject different sets of service regulations independently of ratification of the Convention.

B. Major structural innovations

1. The Administrative Council was instituted in order to provide an administrative continuity for the Union.
2. The International Frequency Registration Board was established so that frequency notifications could be recorded in an orderly way with a view to obtaining the most efficient use of the radio frequency spectrum.

3. A permanent Secretariat was established for the CCIR.
4. The Secretariat of the CCIF (later to become the CCITT after the merger with the CCIT) was transferred from Paris to the seat of the Union.
5. Geneva was adopted as the seat of the Union.

C. Important organizational changes

1. The Atlantic City Conference decided that Chinese, English, French, Russian and Spanish were to be the official languages of the Union and that English, French and Spanish were to be the working languages. The French text was the authentic one which prevailed in case of dispute. Previously French had been the only language of the Union, although both French and English were used during meetings.
2. The Berne Bureau of the Union — the office which carried out the central secretarial functions required by the Convention and annexed Regulations in force — had been run under the supervision of the Government of the Swiss Confederation and most of the staff were Swiss citizens.

The Atlantic City Plenipotentiary Conference established an international

secretariat and included in the Convention the provision requiring "recruitment on as wide a geographical basis as possible".

3. The Atlantic City Plenipotentiary Conference approved an agreement defining the relationship between the United Nations and the ITU.

D. *Concerning the Radio Regulations*

1. The formulation of provisions to ensure the most effective possible use of the frequency spectrum.
2. Establishment of a Table of Frequency Allocations based on the expressed requirements of the different services.
3. Establishment of the technical characteristics required and of the rules governing the assignment of frequencies to stations.
4. Establishment of a procedure to combat harmful interference.

* * *

It was really at Atlantic City, therefore, that the ITU as we know it came into being. One should also mention a new development that was introduced in 1947 and an original idea which was put forward although it was never acted upon.

The Atlantic City International Radio Conference was the first occasion on which mechanical data processing was used by the Union. It was probably also the first time such data processing was employed by any international organization. The use of punched cards for the preparation of lists of frequency requirements foreshadowed the extensive use of data processing to be made by the Union for a large part of its day-to-day activity and, much later, by the other specialized agencies of the United Nations.

The second idea did not meet with the support of Union Members at the time. It was a proposal by the delegation of Hungary to establish an International Telecommunication Bank for the purpose of granting loans for the reconstruction and modernization of administrations' networks. It was also suggested that this Bank might undertake the settlement of the credit and debit accounts of the international telecommunication service.

Much more could be said about what was discussed and what was decided at Atlantic City, particularly in the field of radiocommunication on which most of the interest was centred.

The profound changes in philosophy underlying the new Radio Regulations and the influence these had in shaping the Union as it is today is a subject in itself.

M. MILI