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TARIFF REDUCTIONS ON EDUCATIONAL, SCIENTIFIC AND CULTURAL MATERIALS

Statement by Mr. Julian Behrstock, UNESCO Representative,
in the Tariff Negotiations Committee, 12 September 1961

I should like first of all to convey to you and to the Committee as a whole the greetings of the Director-General of UNESCO. The Director-General is keenly aware and deeply appreciative of the goodwill which the Committee has shown in undertaking, despite its heavy preoccupations, to consider the UNESCO Memorandum on tariff reductions on educational, scientific and cultural materials - now before you as document TN.60/8.

This document contains the essence of the UNESCO proposal. With your permission, however, I should like to describe somewhat more fully the background - background which will, I know, be familiar to some of your members who I hope will bear with me.

Co-operation between the CONTRACTING PARTIES and UNESCO is a tradition dating back almost to the inception of both our Organizations. I myself have had the privilege of participating in this joint effort since the beginning and I should like to say how much it has been facilitated by your Executive Secretary, Mr. Wyndham White, who has always been quick to perceive and act on the objectives we share.

At first sight, it might seem that a tariff and trade body, on the one hand, and an organization devoted to education, science and culture, on the other, would have only a rather remote kinship. But this was not the view of the men and women who founded UNESCO. The Conference of Allied Ministers of Education, at the wartime meeting in London which laid the foundations of UNESCO, urged even then that steps should be taken to ease economic restrictions on the circulation of books, films and other such materials. As soon as the Organization was established, one of the first tasks assigned to it was the drawing up of an international agreement for this purpose. This initiative was inspired by the conviction that, despite the welter of obstacles and restrictions which were an inevitable aftermath of war, governments would be willing to grant free passage across frontiers for a certain number of essential instruments of knowledge.

Where was this view first tested? It was tested on the shores of Lake Annecy in the summer of 1949 when UNESCO - with some trepidation, I will confess - submitted it to what we considered might be, if not the opposition, at least the very severe scrutiny of that arbiter of tariff and trade policy: the CONTRACTING PARTIES to the GATT. What other than a reserved attitude could be expected from busy economists immersed in the problems of postwar reconstruction and now being asked to consider the feasibility of special dispensations for a relatively minute sector of international trade.

Well, the response given by the CONTRACTING PARTIES twelve years ago to the question posed by UNESCO deserves to be recalled and recorded here. The question we had put was this: could an international agreement be established granting duty-free entry to books and publications? The answer of the GATT: yes, it could, and not only for books and publications but also for works of art, educational films and recordings and a whole range of items which the 1949 Conference proceeded to enumerate. And then, not content with that, the Conference went a step further. It plunged into the laborious task of itself drafting the provisional text of an agreement granting exemption from customs duties to these materials. This draft agreement was communicated to the Director-General of UNESCO with the unanimous approval of the Annecy Conference.

The generous initiative taken by your Organization twelve years ago proved to be the foundation stone of a major enterprise. The Annecy draft was studied by a twenty-five-nation conference in Geneva in 1950 and with relatively minor alteration was subsequently adopted unanimously by the General Conference of UNESCO.

The Agreement is now applied by thirty-three countries, its benefits enjoyed by about one billion people. The contracting states are listed at the bottom of page 2 of document TN.60/8; a considerable number of other countries are actively considering adherence to it. Among these, I may mention, are Argentina, Chile, Italy, New Zealand and the United States of America.

It is a tribute to the drafting ability of the 1949 GATT Conference that the Agreement has never given rise to any dispute as to interpretation and that in 1957 a meeting attended by representatives of fifty-two nations held here in Geneva was able to reach the conclusion that the Agreement had proved to be "a valuable and highly effective instrument". Tentative plans have been made in UNESCO to convene in 1964 a further meeting to review the Agreement. Like all the previous meetings we contemplate convening the next one in Geneva to coincide with a GATT session so as to facilitate participation by the tariff and trade experts gathered together under your auspices.

Mr. Chairman, if I have dwelt at some length on the Agreement before coming to the proposal immediately before you it is because the Agreement constitutes the cornerstone of our work in this field. We feel, as did the Annecy Conference in 1949, that the Agreement ought to become a universal standard for the tariff treatment of educational, scientific and cultural

materials. We earnestly hope that those of the CONTRACTING PARTIES to the GATT which have not as yet found it possible to adhere to the Agreement will re-examine the matter with a view to early ratification.

How, then, does the proposal before you tie in with the UNESCO Agreement? In two ways. First, the Agreement grants duty-free entry to a select list of materials - those considered by the GATT and UNESCO back in 1950 as being so essential that a large number of States might be ready and willing to grant them total exemption. The Agreement does not by any means cover all the categories of materials of importance to education, science and culture. A second point is that since some of the CONTRACTING PARTIES to the GATT have not as yet joined the UNESCO Agreement, they may continue to levy duties on certain of the items covered by it. These two factors obviously leave a margin for negotiation of tariff reductions.

Of the list of materials in our memorandum, the principal items going beyond the terms of the UNESCO Agreement are in the field of mass communication. This is in line with a trend which has been recognized, I am glad to note, by GATT itself and the Customs Co-operation Council in their recent sponsorship of the Customs Convention on the Temporary Importation of Professional Equipment, in which UNESCO also played a role.

This Convention goes a long way towards meeting and settling a very serious problem which the press and other mass media had faced in transporting across frontiers the basic equipment needed for international reportage of all kinds, written, filmed or recorded. We consider that GATT and the Council in securing the adoption of this Convention have once again taken a forward-looking step of the highest importance for the practical achievement of UNESCO's aim of promoting the free flow of information. With your approval and that of the Council, we propose to disseminate as widely as possible news of this Convention, particularly among the professional organizations concerned.

Now it remains to be seen whether you consider that there is scope also for the negotiation of tariff reductions on certain items of mass communication equipment destined for permanent importation such as radio and television receivers and newsprint, which in some countries are subjected to very high duties. May I observe that this is of special significance in the technically less-developed countries where broadcasting and the evolving press are seeking the receivers and newsprint necessary to reach vast new audiences. Even in the technically advanced countries, the question arises as to how broadcasting, and particularly television, can be made more accessible to all and in turn linked more effectively to the teaching process.

To conclude; UNESCO commends its proposal to the benevolent attention of your Committee. We know it will receive the same goodwill which GATT has always shown for our common aim of promoting through international trade the advancement of education and mutual understanding. UNESCO for its part looks forward to pursuing this endeavour with you not only at this session but for many years to come.