

5. Reform of colonial regimes – Internationalisation

Internationalisation of the Congo

On April 8, 1908, one week before the opening of the debates, Henri Lambert wrote to the liberal newspaper, the *Gazette de Charleroi*, a letter explaining his position on the internationalisation of the Congo. But in fact as early as February 1895 he had already written in the *Gazette of Charleroi*:

"If the answer to the question of Congo is one of the recovery, a solution that the author of these lines, a convinced opponent of the Congolese adventure, deeply deplores... In short, the colonial problem would be for us to open up Africa in the shortest possible time, a centre of exchange and production. And it would obviously be to free trade that it would look for the answer." If this idea is not new, it is the first time it "is translated into a precise formula for achievement."

The Congo would be administered, in his conception, by a multinational governing council of nine members, comprising two delegates from France, two from England, two from Germany and three from Belgium. The costs would be incurred at a rate of 2/5 by Belgium and 1/5 by each of the other three nations. Henri Lambert pointed out that Belgium had no economic interest to make the Congo into a colony; it became one of the first economic powers without need of a colony, whose management would result in significant expenses and charges for the country. *"Why can it be in the public interest for Belgium to assume the burdens and risks of all kinds of owning this disproportionately large, and geographically and politically ill-located territory, whose wealth is now more or less exhausted or largely granted to individuals, both Belgian and foreign, vis-à-vis which our country has not made any kind of commitment? Are the Belgians ready, both in terms of men and money, to bear the cost of a navy and a colonial army, and to waive in effect their neutrality? What would they say, upon being asked, to what gains have resulted from such sacrifices?"* On the other hand can we ask the Belgians to give up everything? There is "next to and above the economic enterprise, the humanitarian civilising enterprise, which was from the outset the main motive of the work from which the Belgians cannot now withdraw without forfeiture, or loss of dignity."

While the proposal was gaining support in Belgian public opinion, and at a high political level in Belgium, the necessary support of Britain was ambiguous and never forthcoming, despite a draft law awaiting a vote of the Belgian Parliament...