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THE PRESIDENT

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**Welcome address by Mrs. Christine Defraigne,  
President of the Senate, on the occasion of the commemoration  
of the death of Edith Cavell**

12 October 2015

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*Your Royal Highnesses,*

Ladies and gentlemen,

I am delighted to welcome you all to this, the debating chamber of the Senate, and I would like particularly to welcome Her Royal Highness Princess Astrid, Her Royal Highness the Princess Royal and Admiral Laurence.

I also wish to welcome the representatives and members of the Belgian Edith Cavell Commemoration Group, in particular its Chairman, Mr. Andrew Brown. BECCG (fortunately the association is much more pleasant than its acronym) has been very active in perpetuating the memory of the person that we are honouring today in so many different ways in our country.

Of course, I express particular gratitude to the British Ambassador, Mrs. Alison Rose, and her predecessor, Mr. Jonathan Brenton, who have supported these initiatives from the outset and have overseen meticulously the coordination of the series of events which compose this exceptional day of tributes.

It is an honour to have you among us for this event which celebrates a heroine who was British by birth and Belgian in her heart, present in the

collective memory of our two countries, to the point of being a household word for many of our fellow citizens. Edith Cavell also personifies the intensity of Britain's involvement in our fight against the occupiers.

We are now in the very place where the trial of Edith Cavell was held, as we commemorate her death. During the First World War, the occupying forces used this debating chamber as a military court. Hundreds of civilians were judged here by German soldiers for acts deemed hostile to the German authorities.

A 'Free Defence Committee for Belgians before the German Courts' defended prisoners free of charge. Several members of parliament, lawyers by profession and able to speak German, played a leading role in that work. However, their room for manoeuvre was limited, because we know that, for example, the lawyers did not always have the opportunity to meet the accused before their trial.

The commemorative plaques on either side of the desk mention the names of thirty-five citizens who were sentenced to death and then executed. Many others were given long sentences and were deported to Germany. Some were given heavy fines, others were acquitted.

The commemorative plaques appear small in comparison with this spacious room. Yet they are of enormous symbolic importance because they remind us day after day that these heroes put their lives on the line to preserve the life and liberty of others.

Fortunately, this hemicycle has regained its role as a parliamentary chamber. The senators hold their plenary sessions here, and symposia, commemorations and celebrations are regularly held. We have gathered today, one hundred years after her death, to pay tribute to Edith Cavell and thank the United Kingdom for the great sacrifices that it made for the liberation of our country.

The ceremony will continue in two parts: the commemoration itself will be followed by some reflections about topical aspects of nursing. Edith Cavell entered our joint history as a war heroine, but above all, she was a nurse, and it was in that capacity that she wanted to be remembered.

Being a nurse - in Edith Cavell's day, but these days too - is to give of oneself, day after day. Nursing has obviously evolved in a hundred years, but the nurse remains the prime contact for the patient. The nurse is more than a person who administers care - a person who reassures and who listens.

Edith Cavell was able to give of herself by choosing nursing as her profession, as well as teaching it to other young women who came after her. She did not settle for just caring for patients, but also contributed to giving about 200 soldiers their freedom. She believed that she was doing her duty and her courage can but set us an example and inspire us for the future.

When Edith Cavell was arrested, a whole network was dismantled. Edith Cavell is, in a way, one of the symbols of that network. She played an important role in it, and paid for it with her life. In commemorating her death, we are commemorating all those people who participated to a greater or lesser extent in that network to save the lives of the soldiers they helped to escape. Those people - many of them Belgians - risked or sacrificed their lives as Edith Cavell did. Edith Cavell gives them a voice and a face, and we are thinking of every one of them on a day like today. A hundred years after her death, Edith Cavell continues to play a major role.

Unfortunately war is still a topical theme. You only have to switch on the television to understand that, but it is important that people understand that war has devastating consequences and is not just something that happens in distant lands. The current international context and the resulting wave of refugees prove that yet again.

The Senate is working actively to raise public awareness of this issue. To do that, the Senate is addressing its efforts mainly at children and young people. Theme guided tours are organised, children play an important role in the

activities on Armistice Day, there is a leaflet devoted to the Parliament and the First World War. In addition, the Senate is also working on routine education of citizens via various projects. The Senate wants to make its contribution to encouraging children to develop into good citizens with knowledge of the democracy and the history of their country. The commemorations in the context of the First World War offer an additional opportunity to do that, and the Senate wishes to use it fully.

As the President of the Senate, I can but encourage activities like today's. First of all, the heroism and the personality of Edith Cavell deserves to be honoured for her heroic actions, but also because it enables us to keep alive the memory of that sad episode in our history, and learn lessons from it.

I thank you all for your presence, in particular *Her Royal Highness Princess Astrid of Belgium and Her Royal Highness the Princess Royal, Anne of Great Britain.*

To conclude, I cannot resist quoting King Albert I's speech to both Houses of Parliament on 22 November 1918: "*I have another duty to fulfil, to commend the fine military virtues of the Allied troops who fought on Belgian soil, fighting alongside our own, all driven by the same ideals and the same spirit of sacrifice. Let us salute the soldiers of France, Britain and the United States who came to lend us their aid! I bow my head respectfully to those who died and who lie buried in our sacred soil: Belgium will steadfastly uphold their glorious memory.*"

Now, Her Royal Highness Princess Astrid will speak.