

Thoughts of Altiero Spinelli (16 December 1974)


Caption: At the Paris Summit of 9 and 10 December 1974, the meetings of the Heads of State or Government are put on a formal footing. After that date, such meetings are known as meetings of the European Council. Altiero Spinelli, Member of the European Commission, fears that this constitutes a step backwards towards a situation where intergovernmental conciliation procedures will be given precedence over the Community method. Spinelli sees the determination of the Heads of Government to arrogate to themselves the determining of ‘the overall concept of the EU’ as a threat to the role of the Commission as the originator of political initiatives.

Source: Archives historiques des Communautés européennes, Florence, Villa Il Poggiolo. Dépôts, DEP. Emanuele Gazzo, EG. Les institutions et les organes communautaires, EG.B.A. Commission, EG.B.A-04. Commission des Communautés européennes: présidences Ortolí, Jenkins et Thorn, EG-95.

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Altiero Spinelli's thoughts on the tasks faced by the Commission after the Summit of 9 and 10 December 1974

Letter from Altiero Spinelli, Member of the Commission of the European Communities, to his fellow Commissioners

Brussels, 16 December 1974

Dear Colleagues,

Outlined below, for your kind consideration, are the ideas that I propose to uphold within the Commission at our forthcoming meetings, where the President would like us to define our political strategy following the recent Conference of the Heads of Government.

Honesty compels me to warn you that the outcome of these discussions will determine whether I stay on as a Commissioner, confident that the Commission is fully committed to the arduous political task of taking forward the process of European integration, or whether I decide that there is no such commitment and therefore resign.

Kindest regards,

[Signed: Altiero Spinelli]

Altiero Spinelli's thoughts on the tasks faced by the Commission after the Summit of 9 and 10 December 1974

European union as a federal structure

The meeting of Heads of Government held on 9 and 10 December 1974 declared that, thanks to the institutional measures it had taken, 'the process of transforming the whole complex of relations between the Member States', that is to say the process of European integration, 'has already started' (see § 13 of the Communiqué).

In effect, the meeting of Heads of Government has now become the supreme political body, under the name of the European Council, with a remit 'gradually to adopt common positions and coordinate their diplomatic action in all areas of international affairs which affect the interests of the European Community' (§ 4). The Ministers of Foreign Affairs, meeting in the Council of the Community, 'will act as initiators and coordinators' (§ 3). The task of managing decision-making on less important political issues has been transferred to the Permanent Representatives (§ 7). The Governments themselves would decide which of their decisions required the unanimous consent of the Member States (§ 6). Their cooperation 'should be extended to other areas by bringing together the representatives of the Governments' (§ 9).

It was thus at the wish of the Heads of Government, assisted by their diplomatic advisers and without the knowledge of their peoples and parliaments, that political union was first mooted, as a federation, as a league of sovereign states keen to move towards closer union through procedures of intergovernmental cooperation.

The Heads of Government cannot have been altogether unaware that the logic of European union went well beyond federalism, but, in these cases, each affirmation was hedged about with caveats. They merely agreed on 'the advantage' of making use of the transfer to the Commission of certain powers of implementation and management (§ 8). Direct elections to the European Parliament 'should' be achieved within four years, but two Member States were not prepared to accept this even as a conditional formula (§ 12). The Heads of Government would not fail to 'take into consideration the points of view of the European Parliament regarding its association with the achievement of European unity' (§ 12). They invited Mr Tindemans to draw up a report for them on 'European Union', and, in so doing, they downgraded the reports from the

Community institutions to the level of second-tier assessments intended to be supplemented by other, apparently more valuable, consultations. In any event, the Heads of Government reserved the right, after studying the Tindemans Report, to lay before the parliaments, peoples and the world in general their ‘overall concept of European Union’ (§ 13). These pledges, if upheld, would certainly help to move things beyond the federal stage, but they could do so only if, in the meantime, relations between the Member States and the position of the Community in the world did not worsen to a point where these undertakings became impossible to fulfil.

Clearly, however, the Heads of Government adopted the federal design because they were keenly aware of the dangers threatening Europe as a whole and of the need to tackle jointly certain issues which were of great importance to their countries. But the federal response that they provided reflects the poverty of their political thinking and the degree to which, intellectually, they were hidebound by the traditions of their diplomacy.

Twenty-two years of the existence of the Communities — which came into being as a structure designed to be more efficient than intergovernmental cooperation — offer abundant proof that their growing paralysis results from the inability of the Council — a typically federal organ — to shape and consolidate a European political will. Legal theory and political history teach us that federations — unless they include a dominant member — are well able to prompt a number of specific decisions of limited import, but are intrinsically unable to sustain political action with the requisite continuity, coherence and vigour. And yet the Heads of Government opted for precisely this kind of system to tackle the most serious crisis that had faced Europe for some 20 years.

The European Council at work

The impotence of the federal method became obvious the moment that it was announced.

The European Council did manage to break the deadlock on the specific issue of the Regional Fund, after reducing its size still further.

On the other hand, after debating the major challenge of how to control inflation, unemployment and recession, that is to say the economic crisis threatening the future of Europe, and after drawing up a list of the national policies to be followed by each Member State, they made the brilliant discovery that, in order to be convergent, these policies would need to be based ‘on effective (!) permanent consultation machinery’ (§ 19), and on coordinated action (§ 25), in other words on precisely those methods which had been a failure hitherto.

Faced with the energy crisis which, with its worldwide economic and diplomatic implications, was the main reason for the convening of this Summit, they simply took note of intergovernmental contacts, inside and outside the Community, past and future, without being even remotely able to express a common position or initiate any action.

This inability to create any real desire for union was matched by an inability to create any real desire for independence and European standing in international relations. The European Council accepted almost as a matter of course this prior and subsequent consultation of the US Government (§s 20, 31, 32), so arrogantly insisted on earlier by the US Secretary of State. In so doing, it tacitly confirmed Europe’s status as a dependant of the USA rather than its partner.

The Commission squares up to its destiny

(a) — Economic and Monetary Union

Following this meeting, the Commission, the only permanent and supranational political centre, could not just settle for doing what could be done, in the federal context adopted in Paris, to save those elements of the

old Community method which could be saved.

The Commission found that the meeting had provided an inaccurate and unhelpful reply to the question of European unification and that movement down that road would lead Europe to economic, political and diplomatic decline.

It undertook to use all the means at its disposal to convince peoples, political and social forces, and Community governments that the only chance for Europe to achieve unity, independence, dignity and progress in freedom and justice lay in a decision that the conduct of matters of common interest should gradually be transferred to a true European government, distinct from the national governments, which would be accountable to a true Parliament and a Council made up of representatives of the Member States.

To that end, without neglecting the proper conduct of the sectoral policies already being pursued — agricultural, social, regional, developing countries, etc. — the Commission gave priority to the two topics which the European Council had confirmed as major goals still to be achieved: economic and monetary union and political union.

Following the statement by the Heads of Government that ‘their will has not weakened’ on EMU, despite the lack of success on it to date, and that ‘their objective has not changed since the Paris Conference’ (§ 14), the Commission resolved to adopt a new approach to the subject which took due account of the failure of the method of successive, highly detailed stages. The new approach would be based on the creation of a succession of Community instruments designed to achieve convergence of the national policies, without necessarily setting predefined stages in a process of development which was inherently unpredictable.

Measures to combat unemployment, recession and inflation would, in the medium term, remain the responsibility of Member States, which would have to intensify their action on the domestic economic front. Since this fact implied a growing threat to Community integration and international interdependence, the specific role of the Community would be to exercise a real influence on these measures by means of appropriate instruments, to make them compatible and convergent whilst, at the same time, allowing them to remain national policies. The principal instruments required appeared to be:

- (a) creation within the Commission of a European policy and planning institute (taking up the plan conceived by R. Barre and adapting it to the new requirements), which would lay down the main new objectives for the Community and the resulting degree of compatibility and convergence required of national policies and programmes;
- (b) gradual pooling of national reserves in a Monetary Cooperation Fund with all the features of a real issuing bank; the issue of a European currency to be used as a unit of payment in a number of operations still to be defined;
- (c) pooling of part of the financial resources currently used by Member States for their industrial, regional, social and R&D policies and the possibility of topping up these funds later out of Community own resources so that large structural investments, in particular, could be made only with Community financing and subject to Community conditions;
- (d) the possibility of establishing appropriate European credit institutions to mobilise capital for large-scale initiatives of common interest, between Member States or with non-member countries, particularly with a view to encouraging forms of three-way petrodollar investment in developing countries;
- (e) transfer of international economic cooperation to Community competence and establishment of a European Eximbank to promote cooperation plans;
- (f) broadening of the Community’s ability to raise taxes and issue loans so as to help the Community perform the above operations and thus give its budget the status of an economic policy instrument.

Increases in the Community budget would be matched by equivalent reductions in the national budgets, so that overall public spending was not necessarily increased as a result.

The way in which the Commission had previously tried, though without great success, to manage a number of policies, particularly policy on economic union, industrial policy and state aid control, was thus changed quite radically so as to adapt it to this new approach. The Commission departments responsible for general economic policy (DG II, Directorates A and B), industrial investment policy (DG XVIII), industrial policy (DG III) and state aid control (DG IV, Directorate D), were to be merged, streamlined and simplified to form an effective system for planning and managing the Community's financial instruments.

The Commission squares up to its destiny

(b) — European Union

The starting point for putting in place the instruments needed to move EMU forward could and had to be the Community's existing structures, but all this had to be done in a relatively brief transitional period during which institutions for government, law-making and democratic participation had to be established. These institutions were also essential in order for the other policies (regional, agricultural, energy, R&D) to develop smoothly and, above all, in order to give Europe an identity, independence and standing in international relations.

Consequently the Commission had to:

- 1 — speed up the conclusion of its report on political union, giving realistic and sound reasons why the traditional Community method was no longer adequate and the new federal method was not constructive;
- 2 — seek to be associated with Mr Tindemans' report or, at all events, follow its compilation closely, with a view to helping it succeed;
- 3 — challenge the right to formulate an 'overall concept of European Union' which the nine Heads of Government were claiming as their own; ask for the Tindemans Report to be laid before the European Parliament as an important working document, so that Parliament could draw up and vote on the draft(s) of EU constitutional laws to be submitted to the national parliaments for ratification. This procedure was the only way to give all political forces in Europe a fully responsible say in European integration and in order for it to have maximum democratic legitimacy — and given that it was not practicable to hold European elections in 1975 or 1976 — the national parliaments were to be asked, when the Tindemans Report was presented, to revise their representation in the European Parliament in such a way as to give Parliament a constituent mandate.

Conclusion

The Commission formally announced its programme of action on EMU and European Union at the end of its discussions and right at the start of its President's second term of office. It said that each of the partial policies it would be pursuing, including any proposals in connection with UK renegotiation and its relations with the Council, Parliament and the public, would be framed with reference to this programme. By acting in this way, it would be able, in revitalising and lending fresh impetus to European integration, to take on this role of guide which no one was currently playing any longer and which was necessary if the prospect of moving beyond the present federal phase was to remain alive. If the Commission did not take on this role, it was doomed to disappear for ever as a centre of political initiative and increasingly to become a humble technical agency at the beck and call of the European Council and its pretentious but powerless intergovernmental structures.

For the Commission — and its members — the time had come to choose, and the moment could be put off no longer.