

Account by Denis de Rougemont of the Hague Congress (1948)


Caption: In 1948, Denis de Rougemont, general delegate of the Union of European Federalists (UEF), describes the doctrinal tensions which arose at the Congress of Europe in The Hague and places particular emphasis on the importance of the federal approach in the building of a united Europe.

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The Hague Congress or the voice of Europe

That architecture of great beams, rafters and carved crosspieces supporting a huge roof, high above; I had a momentary vision of us as children, leaping from one beam to another without looking down at the yawning chasm beneath us ... I suddenly felt dizzy. I lowered my gaze to look along the bare, white walls, as far as that line of shields with the lions lying down in threes. Lower still there were hanging carpets. Above us was a wide, square canopy, draped with red and gold silk. I leaned my head against the folds of a heavy purple velvet curtain. Who were these people all around me, their faces lit by the beams of the film projectors? I was sitting on the platform, behind two rows of fascinating backs and necks which extended above the backs of the chairs. That very wide, red neck, that was Ramadier; the placid, fair-skinned neck, that was van Zeeland, and that non-neck was Paul Reynaud. A dark head with the hair lying very flat was leaning towards a woman's hat — yes, that was Princess Juliana. A white, puffy neck rising from a black frock coat, that was Winston Churchill. To my left and right were several friends in profile; that young man was a former Dutch Socialist Minister, another young man was a former British Conservative Minister, the slit eyes of Coudenhove, Lord Layton's Voltaire-like smile, a man in black wearing a long chain round his neck. Where was I? When was this happening? Was it a dream? What was going on?

Someone was talking into a microphone, and his voice came back to me from the hall: 'The task before us, at this Congress, is not only to raise the voice of Europe as a united home ... We must here and now resolve that a European Assembly shall be constituted ...'

Yes, it was a dream, a dream which had come true, and which I had been having for 20 years.

In front of us, all round us, in that great Knights' Hall which was the meeting place of a very ancient parliament, there were a thousand people, a thousand Europeans. I recognised a few faces in the crowd: Anthony Eden's moustache, Daladier's sunken face, the profile of the Mad Hatter from Alice in Wonderland (it could only be Bertrand Russell), Prieto's shiny skull, the white curls of William Rappard, a larger-than-life Englishman: Charles Morgan, an archbishop representing the Vatican, a Lord Bishop representing the see of Canterbury, some Labour members of the UK Parliament, a smiling Italian anarchist, German Ministers in rimless glasses ... But why that deafening applause? 'Europe,' someone had just said into the microphone, 'is the civilisation of non-conformists!' I looked at the text that I had been handed. 'Europe is the country of people constantly at war with themselves, it is a place where no certainty is accepted as the truth unless it is constantly rediscovered. Other continents pride themselves on their efficiency, but the European climate is the only one which makes life dangerous, adventurous, magnificent and tragic — and thus worth living.' (It was my friend Brugmans, a Dutch Labour politician, who was speaking before 12 former Heads of Government, 60 Ministers and former Ministers, 200 members of Europe's parliaments and 600 other delegates who had come from 25 countries. But I said to myself that, after all, our Congress was doubly non-conformist: it had managed to bring the conformists and the non-conformists together to work on a common project.).

We had just crossed the hall in procession, Churchill and his wife leading the way. There were flowers everywhere, and fanfares in the palace courtyard. 'You'd think it was a wedding!' the man next to me whispered.

A wedding between whom? Churchill and the European left, perhaps? Or old statesmen and the generations forged during the Resistance? Or, indeed, yesterday's conquerors and conquered? (We had German, Austrian and Italian delegations.) Or the wedding of West and East? No, not that: the 30-odd Romanians, Poles, Czechs, Hungarians and Yugoslavs present were, alas, only 'observers'.

Hold on: the Congress had only just started. History alone would judge the real meaning of this unprecedented ceremony.

I am writing now in the peace and quiet of my country home on the French-Swiss border. (The border is 1 200 metres away. Every time I cross it, I inwardly repeat the final commitment of the Congress: 'We desire a United Europe, throughout whose area the free movement of persons, ideas and goods is restored.')

Over the last fortnight I have read hundreds of articles about The Hague. I have been rereading my speeches for this collection. I am trying to make comparisons and draw conclusions, provisionally, before setting off again.

The enthusiastic applause which greeted Brugmans' phrase about European 'non-conformism' surprised me more than anything else that happened at the Congress. (The press does not refer to it much.) It was no accident, actually, because when Paul Ramadier, at the same opening session, felt obliged to say: 'We are not here to start a federalist revolution!', a stony silence was all the response he got. After that, it was less surprising to see some of those federalist arguments accepted by unanimous vote of the assembly, even though most of the delegates, if asked individually, would probably have admitted that they were a long way from subscribing to the doctrine behind them. The explanation for these final votes could not have been a mass conversion. They reflected a half-conscious, half-reasoned shift towards the only coherent position possible as a basis for an offensive: the federalist position, which is indeed 'non-conformist' in Europe's present state.

There is, of course, an orthodox doctrine of federalism — and I think I know what it is. Sometimes its advocates are concerned at seeing the practical conclusions that they draw from it being adopted by politicians who still think in terms of nations, of rational unification or just of a defence against one or other of the 'two Great Powers'. A devout Christian, seeing his church suddenly filling up with a crowd of unbelievers repeating the same words as him, would feel very uneasy and would wonder what fear was driving them, what great public calamity was on its way. Let us be wary of confusing our categories, however. If federalism aims to be a policy, not a cult or a theology (although it has strong religious connotations in quite a few minds), it will have to work with those who accept it for reasons other than those that it offers itself. In a political setting, more often than not it is the difficult compromise that represents real success. Where a doctrine scores a total victory — be it is a good one or, shall we say, the best one — it either leads to nothing or it paves the way to a totalitarian future.

What will be the consequences of The Hague? What tangible results did we achieve? To my mind there are two, both of which are more important than the resolutions adopted.

1. The Congress of Europe was intended to deliver a jolt and wake up public opinion. To a large extent it did, if not quite as much as it deserved. Awakening Europe's conscience was its only means of action. Inasmuch as it achieved this objective, it established European union on foundations lacking by the UN: the conscious determination of its social groups and the enthusiasm of individuals. Living in a democracy is what counts, and the rest will follow.

2. The Congress of Europe was a chance to highlight real difficulties, and that is the only way of diminishing the frequent objections which can be made to a European Federation by sceptics, reactionaries, sectarians of the left or of big business, shameful nationalists or careless utopians. The very fact that these impassioned debates culminated in unanimous agreement — instead of the split which threatened to happen on three occasions — is a decisive result. The toughest battle for European unity may have been won at The Hague, even if the most spectacular conclusions are only drawn later, and elsewhere.

The European press described the Congress of Europe as a 'federalist' congress. In fact, the federalist groups were in the minority on all counts. In terms of both the numbers and the prestige of the statesman who represented it, the 'unionist' tendency dominated the proceedings to a large extent. It held most of the commanding positions. What did it want to achieve? It is very difficult to say clearly without betraying it. According to the wording of the invitation it had sent out to the Congress participants, it wanted 'greater unity among the countries of Europe' — a rather vague and unconvincing phrase. What kind of unity? And greater than what? It either went too far, or not far enough. It was not a basis to work from, or for an agreement. Who would dare to come out against a little more union in general? The federalists, by contrast, called for specific measures, and especially for institutions, designed to take us beyond absolute national sovereignty but falling short of total 'unity', which was as dangerous as the divisions between us. It was foreseen, that is to say, before the Congress, that 'unionist' inconstancy would play no part in The Hague except to act as a brake, by comparison with a federalism which was coherent and sure of its objectives.

That is what happened in practice. Most of the positions defended by the federalist tendency — and which could already be found formulated in the report from the Montreux Congress — were accepted unanimously. As for the contribution from the unionist side, it consisted mainly of ceaselessly reminding people that they needed to be cautious and pointing to the likely obstacles. It contrived to smother expressions that were too specific — such as Federation — in general wishes which did not commit to anything but at least left the door open. By means of these hesitations, confusions and behind-the-scenes manoeuvrings, we saw the Congress gradually siding with something to which it obstinately refused to give a name or label but which, all the same, was nothing less than the federalist programme. The major institutions that Montreux proposed were adopted in principle in The Hague: the Supreme Court, responsible for sanctioning a Charter of the rights of the individual; the Assembly of Europe, representing the live forces of our nations, not just their parliaments; a common economic body; a European Centre for Culture. And most of the general principles put forward in Montreux were reiterated, almost word for word, in the resolutions adopted in The Hague: not just the partial transfer of national sovereignty to common bodies (which is still the crucial issue) but also the inclusion of a federated Europe in a World Federation, the urgent need to reconcile ‘the exigencies of modern economic development [...] with the integrity of human personality’, and lastly the involvement of the trade unions in the development of the economy thus created.

The federalists’ success at The Hague was not the victory of one party over another. Unionism is not actually a doctrine, it is a normal stage in the development of people’s convictions along the path to effective federalism. Very few of the delegates came out against our arguments. Some of them, to tell the truth, were only afraid of a kind of ‘integral federalism’ based on the local authority and business, which there was no question of anyone suggesting in The Hague. Among the delegates from continental Europe, opposition was thus only from lesser to greater, from caution to innovating drive, from a kind of lingering scepticism to a determination to ‘hustle’ public opinion and the governments. An evident desire to achieve results, springing from a general feeling that the stakes were high, would very probably have taken the Congress a great deal further — if it had not been for the British.

Before The Hague, many people thought that the main dispute would be between Labour and the Conservatives. That showed how little they knew the British.

Behind the often vocal differences between unionists and federalists, the only deep-seated dispute to divide the Congress was the silent clash between the common front put up by the British and the (tactically) scattered moves made by the continental Europeans.

The opposition can be summarised in two remarks, which I noted down during the debates in the Political Committee.

The Rt Hon. Harold Macmillan: Remember your French proverb: hasten slowly.

Paul Reynaud: That’s a curious watchword to suggest to someone who’s drowning!

On a general, theoretical level, both points of view can be defended ad infinitum. Even in practice, they are not necessarily contradictory. But in the specific case of European union, the British position is ambiguous. And in the state of emergency that Europe is in, ambiguity can prove fatal.

But the fact is that most people in the United Kingdom are not aware of this state of emergency. (The British delegates at The Hague kept repeating: If we vote for this or that, which we believe to be right, we will not be followed at home; people do not see things that way in our country.) The great political virtues of that people have always been slowness, a mistrust of solutions based on principle, and trust in a certain vagueness in phrases and statements of position which helps in reaching practical understandings. But it is not certain that this method still works at European level. And at that level it has to be admitted that the British are relative newcomers. Their traditional policy was to stop Europe uniting under the aegis of a threatening nation. The principle was just, but the reflex that it has left them with is not conducive to the type of creative action to which the Congress was supposed to spur us on. If Europe is to come into being, the British must agree to think as part of Europe, and stop thinking as if they were squaring up to Europe

across the Channel, which is a minor geographical detail in the reality of the 20th century.

As soon as the Hague Congress was over, I heard everywhere:

— For us in continental Europe, what is at stake is Europe. For the British, it is first and foremost the Empire, and the union of Europe could save the Empire, providing it is not too much of one thing or too much of the other, too specific, too continental ...

This description will seem hard or even unfair to many of my British friends. I cannot help it: it sums up the opinion of the European press when the Hague Congress was over. If it shocks the British, it is up to them to do something to correct it.

Ah! Gentlemen of Great Britain! I admire your spirit: you never fire the first shot. But in The Hague, that is exactly what our peoples were expecting of us all.

I have just quoted Paul Reynaud. As everyone knows, he caused what is known as a 'sensation' at the Congress by proposing that a constituent Assembly for Europe be elected in the next six months, by universal suffrage, on the basis of one member per million inhabitants. There were nine votes for the motion.

There is a great deal we could say about that setback.

Among those who voted against the Reynaud scheme, some had good reasons, some had fears which stood in for reasons, and some had very bad reasons.

Bad reasons: 'It is just utopia, or it is demagoguery. In any case, it is too soon. The broad masses are not ready for it.' Actually, nothing is more urgent than a Parliament for Europe. And the broad masses will only come out for Europe on the day that European elections are held. And appealing to the masses is not demagoguery, if the reason for doing it is to save them and not to hoodwink them. As for the utopia argument, it is not worth discussing. What were the people who used it doing in The Hague in the first place?

Fears standing in for reasons: 'If the plan does go through, it will put paid to the sacrosanct sovereignty of the nation-state for good. We do want to limit it, but not to that extent. We will be taking a leap into the unknown, where anything could happen. The people will not be behind us. Governments reassure us, and this plan will shock them. And how are we going to inform the general public (i.e. engineer the elections) in the short time that we are being offered?'

Good reasons: 'This plan is purely quantitative, it puts the smaller nations at a disadvantage; it takes no account of the obstacles in the constitutions of several of the countries; and it would create a unitary Europe, not a federation.'

And so we saw people from all the schools of thought agreeing to put up a joint refusal. I would have preferred a refusal that just scraped in, not that stampede towards caution, especially by my federalist friends, because an appeal on those lines was exactly what was expected of The Hague, at any rate within continental Europe. The Reynaud plan was not outstanding. It should have been replaced by a better one rather than being swept aside as though it were something unseemly.

The British closed ranks against the idea and the rest of the Congress was against that specific plan. The fact is that the British do not much like governments being 'hustled'. In the three committees, long before the Congress, they insisted we 'pay tribute' to the efforts of the Five, or the Sixteen, or Unesco, or even the UN. They are satisfied with their government, that is why. Most countries in continental Europe, apart from the small ones, have had different experiences.

The Reynaud plan will triumph if Europe has to be built tomorrow, because everyone agrees on the principle of a European Assembly. But it is very peculiar that no one thought of filling out the plan rather than killing

it off. How are we to rectify the (to my mind critical) error that it contains: the slavish attachment to numbers? By transposing the Swiss or United States system to Europe: a chamber appointed by the peoples is counterbalanced by a chamber appointed by the states, safeguarding the federalist principle of quality against quantity (since each country, big or small, would appoint the same number of members to it).

I have emphasised the differences of opinion, the hesitations, the disputes, not in any way with the intention of entrenching them — on the contrary, my aim is to help, however little, in hammering out the future prospects for our work. The battle for Europe proves that Europe is alive, which means that my opponents are my friends, since the principle for which I am fighting is that of union in diversity.

In the quest to which some of us have committed ourselves, whatever the risks, we are going to be breaking spears on a companion's shield quite often; such is the passion that Europe calls for. But we serve a shared ideal.

We do not want a Europe of the right or the left, nor of the centre, nor, especially, a Europe with no parties: we want a federalist Europe. We do not want a French or British version of Europe, we want a 'Helveticised' Europe, in other words not one without nations, by any means, but one which is not dominated by any one nation.

Europe is a dialogue, an ongoing debate. Only those who would aspire to be the only voices in it can be absolutely refused freedom of speech, just as we confiscate the chips from a cheat or take a razor out of the hands of a neurotic person. Europe must go on being the place where those in power reach accommodations with their opponents: that is the whole problem facing real politics, a problem dictatorships eliminate because they cannot confront it.

Otherwise, where would be the risks of freedom — risks without which there may be no freedom?