

Note from Alexandre Marc on the political implications of the Hague Congress (May 1948)


Caption: In May 1948, Alexandre Marc, Head of the Institutional Department of the Union of European Federalists (UEF), identifies the political implications of the forthcoming Congress of Europe in The Hague and calls, in particular, for the establishment of a Grand European Council and a European Action Committee to ensure the effective implementation of the resolutions adopted at the Congress in a federalist direction.

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After The Hague ... The Europe that must be born

by Alexandre Marc

The preparations for the Congress of Europe (held in The Hague from 7 to 10 May) risked going unnoticed by the general public. The (supposedly serious) press had hardly condescended to devote a few lines to our efforts: a meeting where representatives of all the vital forces within European countries are to seek together a means of public salvation, does not make for a good story. A headline such as, 'Birth of the European Federation' is certainly not a bad one, but it still cannot claim to compete with more sensational front-page headlines such as, 'How I slept in Mrs Goebbels' bed,' 'Was Little K shooting morphine?' 'King Michael's secret love affairs,' or, 'I earned a billion on the black market in wine', etc., etc.

So we were forced to do without the backing of the media. Fortunately a dispute over The Hague arose between the leaders of the Labour Party and that 'exceptional' man, Winston Churchill. It was a lively debate, perhaps less spectacular than the 'Strange suicide of the child-vampire,' but still more newsworthy than boring statements concerning the federalist transformation of the European economy.

[Today, thanks to the exchange of bitter-sweet arguments between the grand old man with the cigar and his ever-watchful political adversaries, the entire world has been informed (often incorrectly, it has to be said) about the existence of a plan for European reunion. Let us hope that this (free) publicity will not render this meeting impossible as a result of the intrusion of party political rivalries and ambitions into a domain that, so far, has barely interested them.

Whatever the case may be, we can now assume that the 'average' person knows about the Congress of Europe — or knows as much as he or she does about all the major topics of the day. It would seem that this means that we can now look beyond The Hague, towards institutional arrangements of which the Congress of Europe should be just one of the first stages.

In our opinion, if a meeting as important as the Hague Congress promises to be, in terms of its size, is to avoid degenerating into a proper Tower of Babel, it must limit its ambitions to achieving a single goal, which is actually three in one.

— As resounding and as spectacular as possible an affirmation of the rallying of people, movements, forces and the most diverse political parties, around the European and federalist idea.

— Voting for a limited number of very simple principles, the partial transfer of sovereignty to federal bodies, moving, via a customs union, towards economic union, implementation (and not the mere 'proclamation') of a Charter of Rights, and refusing to have any truck with imperialist policies, etc.

— Creating new bodies that will ensure that the decisions taken by the Congress are implemented, and will provide, through those countries concerned, the blueprint for federalist institutions.

It is to this, the third and, in our view, the most important part of the task before the Congress of Europe to which we would particularly like to draw attention. Governments today are starting to come to grips (too late, as usual) with the European problem and to deal with it using methods such as pacts, bilateral agreements and military alliances whose failures need no further demonstrating. If we want to salvage Europe and peace, we clearly need to go much further, but governments will only do so if they are forced to. One person who knows about this, Mr Spaak, recently proclaimed, 'You have to push governments; hustle us!'

The bodies that we think it would be useful to consider setting up will certainly not limit themselves to 'hustling' governments, but that necessary task, amongst others, will fall to them.

To illustrate what we have described as being spectacular, the Congress of Europe will have to give birth to a Grand European Council. This will number, amongst its members, the most eminent individuals from the

scientific and literary worlds, from politics and religion, and will therefore symbolise the balance between the most diverse trends, a balance which we might rightly claim represents the very genius of our continent.

This Grand Council will have no specific functions, but it will oversee a Permanent Action Committee, which is made up of people who are fully committed to federalising work and will be nominated on the basis of services rendered to the European cause and their capacity to do the job.

We can expect the European Action Committee to subdivide into a number of sections that, from the outset, will enjoy a measure of autonomy: political, economic and social, 'cultural' and perhaps also legal. Each of these sections will be tasked with a specific drafting role, in particular working on any principles voted on by the Congress. At the same time, the Action Committee as a whole will have the job of overseeing and monitoring the implementation of measures decided upon at The Hague. But the main duty of the Committee will, in all likelihood, be to work to correct those aspects of the currently envisaged procedure that do not satisfy the federalist doctrine.

Let us, indeed, not forget that there can be no federalism without a Revolution starting from below, through a 'democratic' movement (in the real sense) that starts from the bottom. The Congress of Europe is merely a compromise, a lame one like all compromises, between this natural and spontaneous inclination and the meagre means we have at our disposal. But a compromise is only acceptable in so far as it is seen as the means to achieve an even greater demand: that which must be the lodestone for all our efforts.

It will be up to the European Action Committee to return to the first principles. At this stage, we can only point out the main aspects of this necessary 'return'.

When they come back from The Hague, each of the national delegations should not split up but, on the contrary, should continue the efforts that were begun at the Congress by setting up, on the one hand, the Grand Council and, on the other, the National Action Committees. The first will be a meeting of individuals reflecting the main currents of opinion; the second will be based on the model of the European Committee and will work closely with it.

The main agreed goal of these bodies will be to allow our movement to come back down to earth, like Antheus, in order to draw from real life the forces it will need in order to transform Europe.

What is meant by real life? This encompasses the boroughs and workshops, regions and industries, trade unions and cooperatives, universities and churches, family-based associations and political bodies: various groupings that help enrich the life of society. It is within all these organisations, that together express human activity, that the attempt at public salvation that we are determined to promote must take root.

In other words, these diverse groupings must produce an entire 'hierarchy' of committees, starting from the Communal Action Committee for a European Federation, right up to the Central Action Committee, and including all the intermediary stages: factory committees, regional committees, professional and national committees that have already been referred to, without forgetting of course the parliamentary federalist committees or groupings of the kind that already exist within a number of parliaments.

It is only once this inspirational edifice, genuinely based on federalism, has been erected from bottom to top that the first European Action Committee, laying aside for a moment its other tasks, can consider that it has fulfilled its duty. All that will remain will be for it to convene the second Congress of Europe, and then disappear!

Indeed, the first Congress of Europe must already bring together 'authorised' representatives of the vital forces of our continent: unionists and parliamentarians, members of cooperatives and shop-owners, writers and technicians. But it should be said that most of these representatives will not have been appointed through proper electoral processes, nor properly mandated by their peers.

Hence a certain hesitation, inevitably, over the fact that we will certainly receive accusations from the

unconvinced, the weak or the opponents of federalism. ‘This Congress of yours,’ they will say, ‘has neither an established and defined legal authority, nor a clear basis in popular suffrage.’ But it is precisely up to the bodies to be appointed by the members of the Congress in The Hague, and particularly the European Action Committee, to ensure that basis, to organise objectively valid elections and to determine how the nature and relative importance of the mandates will be defined; in other words, to sketch out what could be called the blueprint of the federalist regime.

If this is not done properly, we will have betrayed our mission. Even if we bring together, on the same platform, Winston Churchill and Léon Blum, Paul Van Zeeland and Léon Jouhaux, Britain’s Chief Rabbi and a high-ranking cleric from a Christian church, we will still not have done anything long-lasting. Even if we submit substantial and in-depth reports on the most urgent and difficult issues facing the reorganisation of Europe to the participants, even if we vote through, unanimously, impassioned resolutions in support of a united Europe, even if we get the Congress to approve principles whose importance and fairness we recognise, even if, on the evening of May 10, we depart amidst an atmosphere of fraternity and enthusiasm, we will still have missed a historic opportunity by failing to launch the gestation process of new European structures.

When all is said and done, The Hague will be judged according to the sustainability and efficiency of the bodies it creates. Efficiency in terms of designing a certain number of projects; efficiency in gradually mobilising public opinion and in organising growing pressure on national governments, such as Mr Spaak has rightly called for; but, more than anything else, let us repeat, efficiency in launching and implementing genuinely federalist institutions, destined to gradually reject the gangrenous tissues in our society and to favour the growth of healthy cells within the liberated city.

That is what is really at stake in the battle we are waging and all the rest is merely verbiage ... that of election campaigns and petty politics.