

Bertrand Vayssière, The Hague Congress and the federalists: the desperate quest for the States-General of Europe

Source: Bertrand Vayssière, Université de Toulouse II-Le Mirail, Toulouse (2010).

Copyright: (c) Translation CVCE.EU by UNI.LU

All rights of reproduction, of public communication, of adaptation, of distribution or of dissemination via Internet, internal network or any other means are strictly reserved in all countries.

Consult the legal notice and the terms and conditions of use regarding this site.

URL:

http://www.cvce.eu/obj/bertrand_vayssiere_the_hague_congress_and_the_federalists_the_desperate_quest_for_the_states_general_of_europe-en-cfd79d8b-6d51-4e86-aebe-dd4d80da5933.html



Last updated: 06/07/2016

The Hague Congress and the federalists: the desperate quest for the States-General of Europe

by Bertrand Vayssière

Lecturer at the Université de Toulouse II-Le Mirail

The European Union of Federalists (EUF) is a grouping of various movements which was set up in December 1946 and was, of course, responsive to the reviving popularity of the idea of a united Europe that had been sparked off by Churchill's speeches, especially his speech in Zurich. The movement, which when it was set up had been inclined to indulge in starry-eyed sloganising, moved on to adopt a more constructive form of words better suited to a context of international tension that encouraged the formation of groupings.

The Hague Congress, which was to be an opportunity for hobnobbing with first-rank politicians and gaining access to a wider audience through the planned media exposure, could not help but satisfy the EUF's ardent activists. It would not, however, be seen as one of the most decisive meetings in the history of the federalist movement; on the contrary, its chief ideologue, Alexandre Marc, referred to the Hague Congress, after the event, as a 'paternity hearing', a reflection of the ambiguous position it held in the eyes of federalist activists.

The fact is that the preparations for the Congress and the course it took, while highlighting the wide diversity of sensibilities among champions of Europe, reflected a change in the EUF's line. It had previously been keen to drum up publicity, but from The Hague on it became wary of having its policies hijacked, and for that reason chose to step into the arena itself.

FIRST ROUND: Federalists and their part in the preparations for the Hague Congress

Where were the federalists on the political spectrum? Was there any agreement with other movements?

The Montreux Congress of August 1947 had had the effect of tightening up the federalist message within the EUF. The meeting was undeniably motivated by a clear concern for the principle of realism, something singularly lacking in the early post-World War sloganising, when a unanimous spirit of 'armchair resistance' had prevailed (the Hertenstein Congress of September 1946). This discipline, much-needed given the natural diversity of federalism, was applied successfully under the leadership of the Chairman of the EUF, Henri Brugmans, a Dutchman – greatly helped, it must be said, by the temporary retreat of potential opponents or rivals such as Altiero Spinelli. The number of activists was there, plain to be seen and beyond dispute; politicians knew about it and could not go on denying the importance of a such a large pressure group, which numbered some 150 000 activists in 1947. Duncan Sandys and Joseph Retinger, who were looking to set up an influential European movement, went to Montreux with alacrity and explained their plans to a few privileged insiders, including Alexandre Marc.

Cooperation between the EUF and other pro-Europe movements became official with the setting up of the International Committee of the Movements for European Unity in Paris on 10 and 11 November 1947. The 11 November agreement was ratified by the EUF Central Committee in Paris on 15 November, despite widespread reservations. The federalist movement considered the alliance to be necessary but hoped to steer the discussions in the direction it wanted, believing that the movement's strength lay in its numbers.

From the outset, the differences were very clearly expressed by the chairman of the EUF, Henri Brugmans. The first was that the EUF was 'left-wing', the second that it was a movement of activists destined to become a mass movement. However, despite attempts at a rapprochement with the Socialist Movement for the United States of Europe, whose presence would have given the EUF a better political balance within the coordinating committee, it was the unionists, with the conservative, very media-conscious Winston Churchill, in the lead, who were the best represented. There were, in fact, no federalists in key posts in the Joint Committee, let alone at the head of the working parties set up to prepare for the Hague Congress.

In an attempt to restore balance, the federalists embarked on a campaign to solicit support from influential

figures, thinking that their presence in the delegations would be a means of putting pressure on the opposing camp (Spinelli described it as ‘an exercise in brainwashing via the media’), but all in all it was a failure, as the various personalities the federalists had in mind (Léon Blum, Paul-Henri Spaak) did not respond to the call. It was therefore difficult for the federalists to secure a political counterweight when it came to the Congress.

What were the federalists at The Hague hoping to do?

Very early on, nevertheless, there was awareness in the EUF of how much would be at stake at the meeting, and they were already presenting it as a summit vital to the building of a united Europe. The EUF still hoped to be able to counterbalance the influence of Churchill’s supporters in the coordinating committee. The agreement establishing the committee on 11 November 1947 stipulated that ‘a conference of representative Europeans will be held in The Hague in spring, 1948’. It seemed to be the culmination the federalists had longed for, and in a booklet produced by Alexandre Marc in December 1947 they described it as a ‘true States-General of Europe’. For the EUF, the point was to give the Congress a political legitimacy which expressed the determination of Europeans to achieve unity amongst themselves and, in the revolutionary spirit conveyed by the term ‘States-General’, to confer political authority on the Hague Congress. What one sees in this call is the imprint of the full-blown federalists, who up to that point had been the dominant force in the EUF. People like Alexandre Marc drew their inspiration from Proudhon’s ideas and wanted to set up an organisation which respected the principles of multi-partisanship and individual participation, as well as community autonomy and self-management. With that in view, they wanted to give the Congress legitimacy by appealing to all the interests active in society, who would be induced to play a part in shaping their own political destiny in a framework wider than that of the nation.

This all came to nothing in the face of the more political approach of the unionists. They, as we have seen, had the final say over strategy at the Congress, which they did not want to see moving in a federalist direction. At another meeting of the coordinating committee, on 14 December, they called for ‘a conference bringing together 500 to 800 eminent Europeans’ to be held in The Hague, which meant dropping the idea, so dear to the federalists, of a congress representing the social forces active in Europe, although the federalists were to replace the overly ‘subjective’ term ‘States-General’ with the word ‘Congress’, under pressure from outside.

SECOND ROUND: The Hague Congress and the lessons to be learned from it

What balance of power emerged at the meeting?

The quarrel between federalists and unionists hit its high point at The Hague. Some of the delegates, like the secretary-general of the coordinating committee and then of the European Movement, Joseph Retinger, rather condescendingly said that the quarrel was a matter of different generations: the members of the EUF were, on the whole, younger than those of the other organisations (by a decade on average) and did not, therefore, have the political responsibilities which drove the unionists as a body to act with moderation. There could certainly be no disputing the fact that the latter carried the greater political weight. The only person on the federalist side who could be regarded as a front-rank national politician was Brugmans, who had been State Secretary for Press and Information in his country. The rest of the EUF members, numerous though they were, were not at all prominent on the European institutional scene, as was apparent from the way they were seen by the press during the Hague Congress, when they were described as being ‘purists’ or ‘idealists’ (*Le Monde*), or even ‘anti-communists’ (*The Herald Tribune*).

There were also to be many quarrels over precedence in the relations between the unionists and the EUF. Whatever one might say, the EUF felt a certain degree of frustration: it had to fight for its ‘right to be seen’ and make sure it got media coverage. The fact is that the Congress was an expensive business (it cost £40 000) and it was mainly businessmen close to the *United Europe Movement* and the unionists (J.C. Kaas Sypers, C. Vishil) who were footing the bill. This fact accounts for the prominent positions held by Churchill’s supporters in the organisational plan and the order of proceedings — it was, for example, up to Retinger in the final analysis to choose which delegates would be authorised to take part in the Congress.

Although the order of proceedings gave Winston Churchill, as honorary chairman, the right to make the first speech at The Hague, it was a member of the EUF who spoke straight after him. This was Henri Brugmans, who set out what he called the 'primary question', that which, in his view, should dictate the course of the discussions to be held over the ensuing four days. Brugmans in his message reminded his listeners of the socialist-leaning dimension which a united Europe should be given, a Europe governed by the rules of full-blown federalism, a 'new Europe [which] will be the Europe of producers and workers'. Brugmans' speech had a considerable effect (to judge by the — very subjective — rating it was given by the clapometer, the federalists even seem to have won the popularity stakes), but this gives a false idea of the balance of power in the Congress, as the debates in the three committees which met during the Hague Congress show:

- the first of these, the Political Committee, was chaired by Paul Ramadier. The compromise at which the committee eventually arrived disappointed the hopes of the federalists. It did indeed call for a European Assembly to be established, but called for it to consist of already elected members of the national parliaments, which placed it under close supervision by the member countries;

- the second committee, which was concerned with economic and social issues, was chaired by Paul Van Zeeland. De facto, the solutions advocated by this committee were based on the prescriptions of the free market; the federalists, by contrast, had since Montreux defended the system of 'competitive planning' imagined by Maurice Allais, which married a competitive economy to government intervention;

- the Cultural Committee, lastly, had as its chairman Salvador de Madariaga, with Kenneth Lindsay and Denis de Rougemont as rapporteurs: it unanimously recommended the establishment of a European Cultural Centre, a European Youth Institute and a Supreme Court. This was a resounding victory for the federalists, represented on the committee by Rougemont and Marc, of whom the latter believed that there could very well be an 'overflowing' into the political field from the cultural field.

Even so, this half-victory (no one was really opposed to the Cultural Committee's recommendations) did not stop the polemics breaking out in mid-Congress. Denis de Rougemont, who had an extremely hard time trying to read out his 'Message to Europeans' in the closing session, was telling evidence of that.

What were the lessons for the federalists?

After the Congress, the federalists were entitled to wonder what the future held in store for them. From the media coverage point of view, they came out very badly from a meeting which always seemed, as far as public opinion was concerned, to have been associated with the great names in politics, in whose ranks the members of the EUF were not to be found. The EUF itself was on the way to losing its autonomy, since concerted action by the European movements required some focusing of ideas and action, and the body where this took place was the International Coordinating Committee, which was dominated by the unionists. Shortly afterwards (25 October 1948), the European Movement was set up in Brussels and took over from the coordinating committee. The defining characteristic of this new structure seemed to be unionism, with some people even stressing the odd similarity between the names of Churchill's *United Europe Movement* and the European Movement. The only federalist represented on the leading bodies was still Henri Brugmans, who was appointed to take charge of the public outreach campaign.

The only recourse left to the federalists, then, was to submit or stand down, a difficult exercise likely to reawaken the differences within the EUF which had been muzzled until then. The problem was the attitude to be taken to the other European movements: the question of a European Constituent Assembly, touched on very diffidently at the Congress, emerged as the issue that would give the federalists the opportunity to stand out by showing a boldness which, in the eyes of some, had not been sufficiently to the fore at The Hague. This point itself entailed consequences for the internal organisation of the EUF: federalism as advocated by Spinelli, isolated since the famous Ventotene Manifesto of 1941, might now have a platform on which to express itself and, perhaps, make its mark with, as its theme, the European Constitution, something which the Proudhon-style federalists who had been dominant up to this point did not want to hear mentioned.

The Hague Congress, thus became a point of reference which was viewed in different ways in the ranks of militant federalism itself, thus adding to the confusion surrounding its message. Proclamations of doctrine had been the keynote at the Montreux Congress, but they now seemed well and truly outmoded; under the pressure of urgent events, federalists now wanted to exert their strength unanimously and in specific ways as they faced up to a unionism which had shown how dauntingly effective it was at manipulating the media at The Hague.

The Congress was still there, however, to remind federalists that they should no longer make too many waves, now that Europeanism seemed to be a shared cast of thought. The fact that the word 'federation' was missing from the various declarations which came out of the Hague gathering was therefore not merely symbolic. Not everyone was happy with this deliberate 'cooling-off' in the federalists' ardour, especially as it meant acquiescing in a degree of anti-communism. 1948 was a turning point for the federalists, who, by showing what they were about, drew criticism from an environment in which they had originally seemed to be at home.

Who was right and who was wrong? Perhaps the federalists were paying the price of a measure of realism which turned them away from the dreams they had blazoned at the Liberation. It was time for drastic choices, as the Berlin blockade, which had just started, showed; and that had consequences for militant activism, though none any longer for the doctrinal solidification of a federalism which was now thought to be mature enough to fight.

In the short term, then, The Hague was in no way comparable to a walk to Canossa for the federalists, but it marked their acceptance, whether they liked it or not, of a process of getting into step with everyone else — involving, first and foremost, their enthusiasm and their original objectives, in the interests of gaining an aim which was strategic rather than ideological. In the longer term, however, this kind of on-the-surface alliance and militant opportunism failed to disguise the very wide underlying differences of opinion.