

'Altiero Spinelli, the "prophet of European Union", believes European political unity is not far off' from El País (19 March 1984)

Caption: On 19 March 1984, the Spanish daily newspaper El País describes Altiero Spinelli, author in the European Parliament of the Federalist-inspired draft Treaty on European Union.

Source: El País. 19.03.1984. Madrid. "Altiero Spinelli, 'profeta' del europeísmo, cree cercana la unidad política de Europa", auteur:Arias, Juan.

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Interview

Altiero Spinelli, the ‘prophet of European Union’, believes European political unity is not far off

Conversation with an Italian MEP devoted to the idea of a federal Europe

Juan Arias — Rome

Altiero Spinelli has long been known as the ‘prophet of European Union’. For over 40 years he has been obsessed with the idea of European political unity. All those converting to the European ideal, from Pietro Nenni’s Socialists to Alcide De Gasperi’s Christian Democrats, have had to knock at his door. Not least of all, Enrico Berlinguer’s Communists, with whom Spinelli stood as an independent in the most recent European Parliament elections four years ago. His unshakeable determination and optimism, sometimes decried as utopian, began to bear fruit when, at 76 years of age, Spinelli was the driving force behind the important decision taken by the European Parliament on 14 February when it approved, with 76 % of votes in favour, a plan to convert the EEC into a genuine European union. Altiero Spinelli had a long conversation with our Rome correspondent.

The old European federalist spent 16 years in fascist gaols and was deported to the Pontine Islands along with his lifelong friend Sandro Pertini, now President of the Italian Republic. His prison memoirs are about to be published under the title *How I tried to become a sage*. Now, almost like a miracle, his dream is beginning to come true, just when the EEC is going through its most serious crisis.

This ‘prophet’ with the eyes of a rebellious young romantic immediately impresses you as a free man with clear ideas. He has no office of his own in Rome and uses one belonging to the Republican Party. But he emphasises from the outset that he is not a member of any political party. ‘I agreed to stand for the European Parliament on the Communist Party’s list,’ he says, ‘but only on condition that I would have total freedom to do, write and think what I like, as I have done all my life.’

Spinelli had already made arrangements to go and fight Franco during the Spanish Civil War when he was imprisoned by Mussolini. ‘I had even studied Spanish by reading Unamuno’. This old European bulldog is now one of the strongest advocates of Spain’s accession to the EEC as soon as possible, convinced as he is that the Spanish people will fervently support his vision of making Europe ‘something less than what Switzerland is today, but something more than the United States was immediately after the War of Independence.’

Spinelli believes that unless we build a true European union the whole European project is doomed, with very serious consequences. ‘We must never forget,’ he says, ‘that the European Community is composed of formerly hostile nations that considered their neighbours as potential enemies and that it was created in order to enable them to live together.’ If by misfortune the idea of European unification collapsed, he argues, Europe would inevitably return to internecine strife. In his view it is no accident that any dispute between EEC Member States is still described as a war. The ‘wine war’ and the ‘milk war’ are recent examples. ‘We have even seen a few poor Spanish fishermen dispersed by French cannon fire,’ he says, ‘merely for entering foreign waters.’

The draft Treaty on European Union already approved by Parliament, which will now have to be ratified by a two-thirds majority of Member State governments — i.e. by six countries, or seven if Spain and Portugal have already joined — will mark the advent of a new era in European politics. If the Treaty is approved in its present form, it will give Europe a parliament and a government with the same powers in European affairs as those of national parliaments and governments. Those powers will extend to all fields, not only economic affairs. Europe will be governed by laws submitted by the European Government for approval by Parliament without any requirement of unanimity. As in all the parliaments and governments of the free world, a simple majority will suffice.

The only area currently in abeyance is defence. Spinelli would have supported the immediate creation of a European army as originally proposed by the French, but he realises that the idea is too controversial and that it will take time to be accepted.

‘For the Treaty to enter into force as soon as possible, the Presidency of the European Parliament in Strasbourg must wage a diplomatic campaign *vis-à-vis* the governments of the EEC Member States over the next few months to ensure that they do not oppose it.’

The hard nut to crack is France, which rules the roost. And in France, says Spinelli, ‘everything depends at the moment on the will of President François Mitterrand, who has sufficient powers to push the Treaty through, especially as he could get round the obstacle of Communist opposition by holding a referendum.’

According to Spinelli, the problem is that France has always displayed two conflicting attitudes to European integration: one ecumenical, the other that of a spoiled teenager. ‘Strangely enough,’ he says, ‘every European project has originated in France, and so have all the objections to a united Europe.’

France has been split in two ever since the French Revolution. Its European schizophrenia is symbolised by two major figures: Charles De Gaulle, the nationalist, and Jean Monnet, the convinced European.

On the other hand, says Spinelli, we must not forget that France is the oldest of the nation states, ‘with an exceptionally strong administration, which made it so difficult to solve the problems of Algeria and Indochina.’ But according to the prophet of European federalism, ‘things are changing in France. The taboo has been broken and the French are beginning to realise that they cannot solve their economic problems or guarantee their national defence by relying solely on their own forces.’

And if they really want greater independence from the United States, they must understand that it will not be possible without European union.’ Speaking in Rome a few months ago, Mitterrand indicated that the draft Treaty on European Union was ‘on the right lines’.

The United Kingdom, says Spinelli, is another paradox. Oddly enough, it provides the best and most accurate information on European issues. But the British are also divided, and the funny thing is that the Conservatives are the most ardent advocates of European integration. Spinelli thinks that Britain will be the country most reluctant to ratify the Treaty and that best approach will be to say: ‘We shall go ahead without you’. In Spinelli’s view, the British attitude also has its roots in history. Whenever there was any talk of unification in the British Empire, the answer was always no, since the British believed that ‘once you cross the Channel you are in Africa.’

‘The British have to realise,’ says the Italian MEP, ‘that we are no longer living in Napoleon’s day, nor in Hitler’s.’ But he believes that ‘it will really not be easy for either France or Britain to embrace the idea of a federal Europe. We are talking about two countries — and Denmark is another — in which, unlike Italy, West Germany or Spain, it was the state that created the nation, not the other way round. Where there is a strong sense of the nation, it is easier to feel united in a common Europe. In other countries, the strong sense of the state makes it extremely difficult to feel comfortable with the idea of a federal Europe.’

According to Spinelli, Italy is perhaps today the country most deeply convinced of the need for a united Europe. All agree on this, from the Christian Democrats to the Socialists, even the neo-fascist followers of Giorgio Almirante, who are looking for a place on the respectable right. And the Communists, too. In Italy, says Spinelli, the Catholics and the Socialists were the two great national forces from the outset. Both were anti-war. And during the Second World War it was mainly in Italy that the European federalist movement developed. The first international congresses and the first Ventotene Manifesto were organised and promoted by Spinelli and his friends.

To understand the Catholics’ pro-European commitment, says Spinelli, we must remember that the three largest states in Europe — France, Germany and Italy — were formed in opposition to the Church. When the wave of nationalism engulfed everyone in the late 19th century, the Catholics found themselves, together

with the Socialists, in the vanguard of the European movement. Spinelli points out that the three great Catholic leaders of the time came from border regions. Maurice Schumann was a German soldier who later became French; Alcide De Gasperi was an Austrian MP who subsequently became an Italian; and Konrad Adenauer was a Rhinelander distrustful of Berlin who could not stand Prussians. 'All men from border regions,' says Spinelli, 'were either extreme nationalists, like Hitler, or people for whom nationalism meant little or nothing.'

The conversion of the Communists was prompted by the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia. After breaking with the USSR, the Italian Communists looked towards Europe, and they too asked Spinelli for help. 'So much so that they offered me a place on their list for the European Parliament elections with no strings attached.'

Once the prophet of a European utopia, the old Italian federalist is becoming the real leader of the federalist movement in the European Parliament in Strasbourg, where he enjoys great prestige.

In his recent speeches in support of the new project for genuine Europe unity, he told his European colleagues that this was the only way to cease being 'vassals of the United States or the Soviet Union and become a reference point for the Third World', which today, he says, is more inclined to laugh at the old Europe than at the empires that are seeking to dominate it.

'Without a serious and tangible European policy,' says Spinelli, 'Europe will always be in a state of chronic dependence.' In his view, the forthcoming European elections will be centred on the project of European unity, 'either for it or against it', and the new Parliament will have to confront the issue immediately.

That will be the great difference between this and previous elections, when 'we were totally confused and had no idea what purpose the new European Parliament was supposed to serve.' Now there is a project that will have to be debated thoroughly.

Spinelli believes that the new treaty will have to be implemented 'step by step', beginning with an appropriate economic policy and a common foreign policy.

The first tangible proposal could comprise plans for European defence and the unification of armed forces. But a single joint foreign policy is a precondition for any policy on military affairs. A European army, which would at first incorporate existing national forces, could see the light of day in a year or two.

'That,' he ventures, 'would put an end to the current economic war within the EEC once and for all. The European Parliament and Government will have to formulate a genuine European economic policy, with practical legislation tabled and approved by Europe's political forces by simple majority vote, without the possibility of a veto.'

Is all this merely a dream?

Spinelli replies that, on the contrary, more and more people believe that the project has great possibilities and is becoming more necessary with every passing day. Certainly, his own determination will not weaken as long as he has life in him. And all his life goes to show that Spinelli does not lack courage, hope or tenacity in defending the ideas in which he has always believed.

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