

Working Lunch with Presidents of the Commission and Parliament

30 June 2009

David Pollock and Rob Buitenweg represented the EHF at a working lunch in the Berlaymont building in Brussels on Friday 26 June 2009 between the Presidents of the Commission and Parliament, two other Commissioners and various officials and a variety of other non-confessional organisations.

David Pollock said afterwards:

“This was a distinctly odd occasion, with no agenda and no information about who would attend until at best 24 hours in advance. In the event, the official guest lists revealed a bizarre and apparently arbitrary choice of organisations, including many secularist Masonic lodges. Nevertheless the event seems likely to be repeated (see below) and it can probably best be seen as an attempt by the Commission to establish separate, parallel dialogues with religious and non-confessional groups rather than recognise either the lack of differentiation between them in human rights law on religion or belief or indeed the overlap between them in practice, however distant the extremes. The Commission would thereby legitimise the close relations they have with the churches and other religions by maintaining an occasional exchange with a non-confessional group.”

As a pleasant three-course lunch was served and the interpreters looked on from behind their glass windows, the guests were welcomed by Commission President Barroso and by European Parliament President Pöttering, with mentions of human dignity and the humanist heritage of Europe running alongside the Christian one. They invited contributions on the state of Europe from those present.

The discussion was inevitably a sequence of individual contributions with little interplay. Several of the Freemasons spoke, mentioning (for example) their suppression under fascism in Spain, their commitment to secularism, and some of their current grievances on this score in their countries. Some of them mentioned work they were undertaking – for example, in overcoming the inheritance of ethnic and religious hatred in Kosovo. One of the guests from the Fédération Française du Droit Humain spoke of the need to value ‘the other’ – i.e., difference – rather than pursue separatist paths, and one of the guests from the Spanish human rights organisation spoke of religious obstruction to reform of laws on abortion and euthanasia.

There was some discussion also of the low turn-out in the European Parliament election and ways that young people could be educated about the European institutions and the importance of cooperation.

Keith Porteous Wood from the National Secular Society (UK) spoke of the Islamist subversion of the UN Human Rights Council and of the dangers of religious courts. Alan Frommer of the Association Européenne de la Pensée Libre spoke of religious obstacles to scientific research and his colleague Tony van der Haegen of the influence the EU might bring to bear on China and other countries that did not respect human rights.

Rob Buitenweg for the EHF spoke as follows:

“I would like to say a few words about the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the EU, which was adopted in 2000 by the presidents of the European Parliament, the Council and the Commission, and now has been attached to the Lisbon treaty.

I think the adoption of the Charter was a very important step in the history of international human rights, which started with the adoption of the UDHR.

The UDHR, adopted in 1948, contains both so-called civil and political rights, such as the right to freedom of belief or the right to freedom of expression, and economic, social and cultural rights like the right to adequate housing, the right to food, the right to health care. The declaration was followed by international covenants, as the UDHR was not a binding document – for instance, the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) and the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR).

If you look at these two covenants, you notice that economic, social and cultural rights are neglected as compared to civil and political rights. The wording of the rights in the ICCPR is more stringent than the wording of the ICESCR and the mechanisms to ensure compliance with the former are more elaborate than those in the latter.

The same phenomenon is noticeable when one looks at the human rights documents of the Council of Europe. The European Convention on Fundamental Rights and Freedoms, which covers civil and political rights, is more generous in assigning justiciable rights than the European Social Charter. And its mechanisms to ensure compliance with the rights of the European Convention of Human Rights are much more effective than the mechanisms of the European Social Charter.

It is clear: economic, social and cultural rights have been largely neglected. But, now we have the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the EU. It contains both civil and political rights and economic, social and cultural rights. The website of the European Parliament says jubilantly: “The European Union Charter of Fundamental Rights sets

out in a single text, for the first time in the European Union's history, the whole range of civil, political, economic and social rights of European citizens and all persons resident in the EU".

Wonderful. It looks as if the period of neglect of economic, social and cultural rights has come to an end. But I am not sure.

Firstly, the wording of the various rights in the Charter gives the impression that economic, social and cultural rights are less wholeheartedly recognized than civil and political rights. Secondly, it still is questionable to what extent these rights can be invoked in court, and what court is authorized to deal with violations of the rights in the Charter. Thirdly, I am not convinced that the authorities of the EU will treat economic, social and cultural rights on the same footing with civil and political rights. Perhaps they will. Perhaps they are excellent people with a humane disposition.

Perhaps, though, they suffer from the same disease as the UN and the Council of Europe and are inclined to neglect economic, social and cultural rights. That would be a disaster. Because people may enjoy their civil and political rights, they may have freedom of belief, freedom of expression, freedom of association, etc. but when they do not enjoy their economic, social and cultural rights, when they do not have shelter against cold and rain, when they don't have access to education, when they are denied access to health care, when they starve to death, what then is the worth of their freedoms?

To be on the safe side, therefore, I would like to give you this book which I have written, hoping you will read it and reflect some of its thoughts in your policies".

David Pollock spoke next and introduced the EHF as a federation of 42 organisations in over 20 countries. Referring to the fact that human rights treaties gave equal protection to non-religious beliefs and atheism as to religion, he said that, although humanists and atheists generally did not evangelise about their beliefs, they did maintain that anyone who objected to secularism as a political principle of (at least) state neutrality on matters of religion or belief was ipso facto asking for privileges for some belief group and for discrimination against other groups. But this was what many churches and other religious organisations did all the time.

He suggested that the EU, being committed to the European Convention on Human Rights by the Maastricht Treaty, had a role in upholding human rights not just elsewhere in the world but in its own member states, many of which fell short of the minimum standards required. He referred as an example to the homophobic law that the Lithuanian Parliament had passed and that had to be signed or vetoed that day by the country's President. He suggested that an important virtue of international organisations such as the EU, the OSCE and the Council of Europe, in each of which the EHF was active, was to urge governments to uphold principles and take account

of longer-term considerations (such as climate change) that tended to be discounted under electoral pressure for short-term results.

Louis Michel, the retiring Commissioner for Development and Humanitarian Aid, Ján Figel', the Commissioner for Education, Training, Culture and Youth, Hans Gert Pöttering and José Manuel Barroso in turn replied to the discussion. Louis Michel expressed doubts about the law involving itself with dress codes, which called in question respect for people's fundamental rights – surely a principle of secularism. He spoke of the considerable achievement of the Commission in achieving [a broad \(draft\) directive against discrimination](#). Ján Figel' spoke of the growing diversity found in Europe and the need for dialogue and attention to both freedom and responsibility in the interest of living together peacefully and productively.

Hans Gert Pöttering spoke of tolerance and expressed concern at the lack of it in (for example) Saudi Arabia where Christians had no churches whereas Muslims in Europe could build mosques. He also defended the invitation to the Pope to address the European Parliament and deplored the “lack of tolerance and respect” of those who had opposed the invitation. He said he was critical of Roman Catholic views on (for example) homosexuality, but defended the right of churches to voice their views. Decisions were for politicians to make in the context of their own countries' traditions and cultures, which differed widely. He regretted the low vote in the recent election and said it was time political parties took the European Parliament more seriously.

José Manuel Barroso spoke of his respect for the organisations present at the lunch. He recalled that in his youth freemasonry had been illegal in his country under Salazar's ultra-conservative and religious regime. He said he wished to continue the dialogue with non-confessional organisations as with the churches and other religions. The Commission was itself secular and neutral, with members having a wide variety of views. He was proud of the non-discrimination directive: it had been opposed on grounds of subsidiarity but the Commission had decided it was right to take action – though, of course, member states still had to agree it.

He spoke of the pressure he had to put on governments to nominate women to the Commission, and of his concern at the work of the Organisation of the Islamic Conference in the UN Human Rights Council. He recalled that in the crisis over the Danish cartoons he had issued an immediate statement upholding freedom of speech. He rejected the idea, put forward by one of the guests, that there should be a Commissioner for Human Rights: it was better as at present to have a human rights panel that met regularly and stressed the importance of human rights in the work of all the Commissioners. The EU's record was good: he personally repeatedly raised human rights concerns with countries such as Russia, China, Turkey and recently Japan over its resumption of capital punishment. He had asked Mr Putin: “Why, with all your security forces, can you never find the killers of journalists?” As to economic and social rights, there was disagreement between member governments but the

Commission was doing what it could – as it did in the matter of communicating its work to the general public, but although everything was on public record there was as yet no European public space and much of the EU's work was ignored.

Secularist Freemasonry

A student of the subject writes:-

British freemasonry was created in the 18th century and was more “deist” than “religious”. It was exported to mainland Europe by the British armed forces in the Napoleonic Wars.

Around the late 1860s the Continental and British Freemasons split apart. The British remained deist and insisted on references to the “Great Architect of the Universe, God” in their ceremonies. Many Continental masons, especially the French, had become atheist by this time and they wanted this reference to “god” to become optional. This caused a split that has remained until today.

In addition, these secular Continental Freemasons became very politically active, especially in France where they were at the forefront of the battle for the separation of State and Church (which they obtained in 1905). Since then they have been at the cutting edge of social legislation, such as for abortion and women's rights. Secularist French organisations, such as the Fédération Nationale de la Libre Pensée, cooperate with these secularist masonic lodges.