

How to shape the road to European Citizenship 17 November 2007

This speech by Dr. Georges Liénard, EHF general secretary, was delivered at a seminar organised by at Klingberg on November 17, 2007.

To propose a first and rapid answer to the question “How to shape the road to European Citizenship”, one may say, probably to general agreement, that up to now the European Union has not clearly demonstrated any profound interest in the European citizens. Of course many meetings are organised on this topic but without many practical effects.

From the most accepted principles of democracy, society has to be built by and for the citizens. It is easy to perceive that, for several years and up to now, the debates and the preparation of successive treaties have been based on political compromises between national interests in which the individual citizen is not involved – indeed, is kept at a distance. He may feel neglected.

Furthermore, and more disturbing, the basic principles of the treaties are not presented and discussed, neither on a European level nor on a national level.

What about questions related to social cohesion, what about the politics of vicinity with countries that are not members of the Union on important subjects such as energy supply? Which kind of economic politics will be conducted? Remember that the Union preferentially chooses to organise at the highest level a “regular dialogue” with the churches, apart from the other participants of the civil society.

In such a situation, can the individual citizen discover a readable and justified project for himself and consequently to empower him as a European Citizen? There is one major exception, the Charter of Fundamental Rights was adopted but will not be part of the Treaty.

Before going on with Citizenship, let us mention first an important and general statement. Everybody’s citizenship is constituted by the sum of singularities and peculiarities or, in other words, by the sum of our identities, as pointed out by Amartya Sen (*Identities and Violence*): our jobs, families, hobbies, philosophical or religious convictions, sporting activities, political sensibilities . . .

Amin Maalouf (*Les identités meurtrières, Murderous identities*) also introduced the observation that if somebody’s identity is reduced to a single and exclusive adherence to a group, either religious, national, regional or other, it most often produces fear, anxiety or even violence against “the others”. That is why Maalouf concludes in writing: “To coin a new Europe we need to coin a new approach to identity, for Europe, for the different member States and also for the whole world, ... to create the feeling to belong to the Human adventure.”

If these conditions are taken into account, it is possible that a European Citizenship will not replace a national nor a regional Citizenship, but will increase all our particular identities and citizenships.

What can Humanists aim for?

To attain this goal, we, as humanists, ought to work to open doors of closed identities blocked by nationalism, racism, religions or closed groups.

Thus we cannot limit our activities and working plans to the fight against discrimination due to religious fanatics but on the contrary we need to promote various projects to open various perspectives to as many people as possible, and consequently not only for those developing humanist lifestyles, but also for many others sharing our values but driven by other lifestyles.

It seems to me a wonderful and unique opportunity, offered by the building of the European Union, to give humanism more visibility and moreover to render our proposals acceptable and shared by more people.

The EHF is in a good position to do so, being well recognised as the humanist representative in Europe.

Contrary to Roy Brown, in part of his paper entitled "Work in Progress", EHF has obtained equality of representation in European Institutions. EHF has been recognised by the European Commission as representative of the "non confessionals" and was invited, in this capacity, to meet the President of the Commission J. M. Barroso.

A few years ago in 2003, EHF presented to the Convention "For the future of Europe" its position on the many topics that were under consideration as necessary elements in the organisation of a European civil society. The main relevant subjects were: no discrimination based philosophical and religious convictions, participative democracy to develop a European Citizenship, democratic control through the EU Parliament, completing a European social charter, reinforcement of the role of the public sector, notably in the areas of education and health, improvement of sustainable development perspectives...

EHF has insisted that the constitutional Treaty stipulates that the Union rests on following universal and non-negotiable principles: dignity of men and women, freedom, equality, solidarity and tolerance, and on the principles of democracy and the rule of law. All these positions were posted on the Convention web site to be addressed to the Convention's members.

A credible project

On the occasion of EHF's 15th anniversary in 2006, EHF reproduced its most important interventions and some by its partners, developed since the beginning of the J. Delors presidency, in 1999.

It is worth noting that most of our positions were shared by other groups and NGOs, giving a positive signal for further common actions to reinforce European Citizenship. Some of EHF proposals are quite usable for creating European Citizenship. Let us summarise some of these.

Social cohesion

Social cohesion between citizens is created by solidarity. The public sector guarantees equal treatment for everyone and contributes importantly to social cohesion. If we wish to prevent or reduce social division, we must give public services their proper role in the face of market forces. That can only happen with a public sector capable guaranteeing the basic services to which all citizens without exception must have access.

Public undertakings and undertakings providing services of general economic interest must be guaranteed to all citizens without exception in the following areas: education, culture, health, public security, worker protection, protection of the environment, help for the underprivileged, aged and disabled.

Let us remember that EHF organised with many partners a colloquium on social cohesion last October at the Council of Europe

Sustainable Development

Reduction of social inequality, the struggle against poverty and social exclusion, preservation of the environment, rational use of natural resources – these are issues of global significance. The idea of sustainable development reflects these issues in that it brings together social, economic and environmental concerns.

It is a matter of moral and social responsibility towards present and future generations.

The struggle against exclusion and poverty

It is not acceptable to see a steady increase in poverty and exclusion when Europe is one of the most prosperous regions in the world. In the struggle against inequality between poor and rich regions, the European Union can and must show the way to a more equitable society for everyone.

This situation destroys our sense of values for the European idea in setting one people against another, distancing them from notions of cohesion and European Citizenship.

Education

Europe is a place of cultural, ethnic and religious diversity. With reference to this situation and in order to develop European Citizenship, the European Union must therefore become a place of tolerance and, even better, of respect and mutual understanding. In this the role of public authorities is fundamental, particularly as

regards education concerning religious and non religious believes, in order to promote children's autonomy and ability to become tolerant citizens.

Any education about religion that is provided in any publicly funded school must seek to provide information, to develop thinking skills and include all relevant beliefs, including non-religious beliefs. Most important, it must be objective, fair and balanced in its dealing with different beliefs and put religious and other beliefs in a historical and social context.

Last year, EHF's board had created a working group to prepare a humanist position on this question. Suzy Mommaerts and Luc Devuyt are members of this group and take part of this colloquium.

The European Dream

The main task that European politicians must have in their sights is to create a favourable context for the promotion of progressive values. This is the focus of the current debate about the nature of the Europe we wish to construct. Is it a matter of working out a simple agreement for free exchange, providing a referee in the commercial jungle where people have little place? Or is it a matter of constructing a more ambitious union, a truly collective project for social progress on the basis of shared humanist values and on European Citizenship ? Only a project with this ambition is capable of motivating people with sufficient energy.

However that may be, the European project must be worked out democratically. Strengthening of citizenship by the development of broad democratic debate across Europe is a move in the direction of the dignity, freedom and social cohesion that are at the grassroots of Citizenship.

Are Humanists involved?

Finally some questions also arise to determine how deeply European humanists and "laïques" are concerned with this approach of creating Citizenship. We cannot neglect this in considering the subject of the talk I was asked to present to you.

First question is: do the majority of European Humanists agree with the various actions posed above? This question is not innocent: some of us are of the opinion that we should restrict ourselves to the objective of separation of church and state. Of course, nobody is proposing we should renounce to this goal, one of major interest in the EU.

But considering that humanism claims to be a lifestance, it seems reasonable to enlarge its scope and its fields of action to many aspects of life. But some humanist groups are claiming that, in doing so, we engage in political activities and that humanist associations ought to avoid such an approach.

We cannot neglect this diversity of opinion.

More radically, the next question is to determine which Humanists and EHF member organisations are interested in participating and supporting EHF in organising such an extension of activities devoted to the promotion of European Citizenship. Not only in voting radical resolutions at general assemblies but in providing enough financial and human support.

We must not avoid giving a precise answer to this question, knowing that without efficient means there is no way to attain a goal. I am convinced that we must face these questions and decide in common if we are willing to develop our European citizenship objectives and give ourselves the means to do so. As I was saying previously, the European Union gives a wonderful and unique opportunity to give humanism more visibility.

Now and not in 10 years.