

**REMARKS BY DAVID POLLOCK, PRESIDENT OF THE EUROPEAN HUMANIST FEDERATION,
AT THE "SUMMIT MEETING" UNDER THE "ARTICLE 17" DIALOGUE OF REPRESENTATIVES
OF THE PHILOSOPHICAL AND NON-CONFESSIONAL ORGANISATIONS WITH THE
PRESIDENTS OF THE EUROPEAN COMMISSION, COUNCIL AND PARLIAMENT
30 NOVEMBER 2011**

May I start by associating the EHF with the messages given Madame Oberlin about the need to foster the development of democracy and human rights in the countries of the Arab spring? The EHF in its very small way has been involved and is planning greater involvement in helping women from Arab countries to gain in confidence and skills to assert themselves and play their part in civic life.

In your letter of invitation to today's meeting, Mr Commission President, you rightly say that in our ambition "*to build a future based on **democracy, pluralism, the rule of law, human rights and social justice***" the task lies not only in the EU's neighbouring states but at home also.

You are right. Let me refer, for want of time, only to democracy and pluralism. The lack of democracy in the EU has long been a cause for concern and is now fundamental to our troubles. We are living through a financial and economic crisis - but it is a political crisis also: a crisis for democracy. It is no use proclaiming that the European project is a democratic one when in practice the people of Europe and even their political representatives are too often left in powerless ignorance. Meanwhile those responsible for this crisis continue to dictate policy, and major cuts in social budgets are presented as inevitable without convincing reasons why alternatives are ruled out - alternatives such as have been suggested by many, including Guy Verhofstadt and indeed my colleague Pierre Galand. The free market for a time delivered prosperity, but inadequate regulation has now allowed it to deliver recession and collapse. It is time for our European representatives to reassert their political power so as to protect the people and our future. We need strong measures to restrain the runaway freedom of speculators and so protect our common good. It is a matter simultaneously of solidarity, prosperity, human rights, freedom and democracy.

As to pluralism, my focus is narrower and closer to home. I refer to this very dialogue under Article 17. The European Humanist Federation did not seek this dialogue. [We do not consider ourselves - and we do not consider the churches or other religions - any better qualified for it than most of the civil society organisations with whom the EU consults under Article 11 TEU. Indeed, at times of crisis such as we live in it is unlikely that the Presidents of the Commission, Council and Parliament do not have far better things to do.]

But since the dialogue exists, the European Humanist Federation is determined that it should be conducted evenhandedly and fairly - and transparently. For our part, we do what we can for transparency by posting on our website virtually all our exchanges with the EU institutions.

The EHF is an expanding federation of 53 organisations in 23 countries with contacts in several others. We are active in the OSCE, the Council of Europe, the European Parliament and in other contexts at European and national levels. We have a 20-year history of

engagement with the European Union. Broadly speaking, we represent not only the many thousands of people in our own member organisations (one of which, admittedly very untypical, has over 2 million members) but also the majority of non-religious people throughout Europe. These make up a large proportion of the population of Europe: in 2005 Eurobarometer found that in the then 25 member states only 52% of people believed in God while 18% rejected outright even the idea of 'some sort of spirit or life force'. And in 2007 Eurobarometer found that 46% thought religion had too important a place in society. These figures will since have grown.

So, if a dialogue is to be pursued, the non-confessional organisations must be fully involved - including most certainly the European Humanist Federation.

I note in passing that Article 17 talks also of "religious associations or communities". We have good relations with some of these and share their concern that they are excluded from the dialogue. They maintain that the religious hierarchies of bishops are not representative of them: to revert to democracy, the churches are decidedly not democratic institutions, while the organisations I refer to represent the grass-roots of their communities.

So we are looking for much greater openness and fairness in the European Commission's approach to the Article 17 dialogue.

Insofar as you are looking for an ethical input to policy considerations, the humanist contribution is equally valid with religious views. Often, indeed, we will agree on ethical questions - such a poverty or climate change. Indeed, if the different religions can sit side by side to contribute on such matters despite their differences, there is no reason why the humanists also should not do so. But if the Commission requires that we non-confessionals have a separate dialogue, then it must be an equal one - equal in length of meetings, equal in access to officials, equal in recognition and standing.

This has not hitherto been our experience. We had to press for meetings before they were granted, although the churches had been having meetings for years. Our meetings - such as this one - are typically shorter than the meetings with bishops. Our request for a dialogue seminar was rejected for six months and accepted only after we complained to the Ombudsman.

We suggest that a new start is required. It is perhaps opportune that BEPA will have a new official in charge of the dialogue, which offers the possibility of a more balanced and open approach, and that the EHF will, after next May, have a new President as I am reaching the end of my term of office. The new start, we suggest, should involve a more collaborative approach. There should be consultation about the subjects for these meetings. There should also be consultation about who is invited. The dialogue is meant to be open, but two of our Member Organisations tell me that when they asked this year to take part, one did not get even an acknowledgement, and the other got no substantive reply, let alone an invitation.

On a related point, the European Humanist Federation warmly welcomes the secularist Freemasons as allies, and we are looking forward to much closer collaboration in the near future, albeit some of the institutions represented at these meetings, though secularist, are

not in fact non-confessional. But the balance of invitations is in our view quite disproportionate.

In summary, if the Commission wishes to shape its policy to appeal to the citizens of Europe, it must remember - as repeated Eurobarometer surveys have shown - that the values espoused by those citizens are human rights, democracy, peace, and the rule of law, respect for other cultures, solidarity, equality and tolerance. All these and more are consistently put ahead of religion, which always comes last with a declining score. And these are humanist values such as the European Humanist Federation espouses, suggesting that we rather than the churches can claim to be representative of typical Europeans.