

ALTIERO SPINELLI

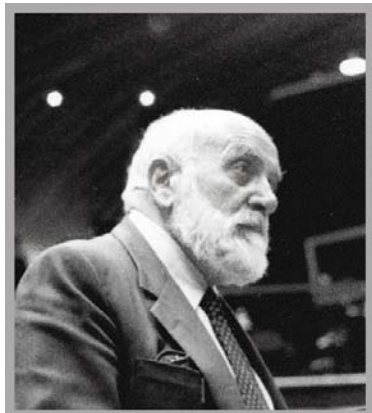


a Tribute by
Brendan Halligan

Altiero Spinelli

1907-1986

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It is proper to commemorate Altiero Spinelli when marking the sixtieth anniversary of the Schumann Declaration. Along with Monnet and Delors, he belongs in the European Pantheon dedicated to those who created and built the European Union of today.

He stands in the middle between these two great Frenchmen, for if Monnet gave life to the ideal of integration and nurtured it through its infancy, and if Delors was to steer it from adolescence to early adulthood, it was this great Italian who inspired the first and guided the second, and who led Europe at a moment of crisis on the passage from childhood to adolescence.

In his memoirs, Monnet reminds us that while institutions endure, nothing can be achieved without the individual, that special type of individual who puts their stamp on history and leaves the world a different place; in Spinelli's case, a better world. Each of these three men, whose lives overlapped and intertwined, not only understood how the world of politics works, but more importantly, knew how to make it for the purpose of change, transformational change.

Interesting too, that while each was the product of his own intensely local culture, all three focused their intellects and energies on promoting the European ideal; none ever held the highest office in their country; and all three spent the latter part of their career exclusively devoted to European affairs.

None of them became a European by accident, but by conviction. None of them chose Europe as a career, but accepted it as a vocation. None of them saw Europe as the road to personal advancement, but as the pathway to continental prosperity and peace.

They represented a new type of political actor, the one who went beyond the commune, the region, the nation itself, and embraced the higher interests of a continent, because they understood what unites humanity and feared that which divides it.

Shaped by History

Spinelli was positioned by both the timing and place of his birth to understand the forces that shape history, to experience the depravity of totalitarian dictatorship and to suffer the horror of war. As a Roman, he stood at the centre of the European world. As a young Italian he lived through the First World War and the coup d'état by the Fascists. His own reaction to Fascism was typical of many idealistic youth at the time, for it led him into the Communist Party. In short, into the vanguard of the resistance to Fascism. His engagement in the struggle ended with imprisonment and was followed by exile to an open prison on the island of Ventotene, some sixteen years in all.

That's a long time in the life of a young man.

But while he was imprisoned in body, his mind, as the prison lives of Irish patriots also testify, remained free and roamed through history and contemporary politics. The intellectual vigour of his years in captivity is astonishing. He began the process of dissecting what was happening in Russia under Stalin, denounced the infamous show trials of the 1930s and began to formulate what later became known as Eurocommunism (even if it was a contradiction in terms) an attempt to marry communism with democracy and humanism.

His greatest achievement, however, was to see through the darkness of war and envision the Europe that would arise from the ashes. The Manifesto that he wrote with

his fellow prisoner, aptly named Rossi, is astonishing in the sweep of its political and economic analysis, and breathtaking in its refusal to accept the present as permanent. It is also inspiring in its utter conviction in the ultimate triumph of the human spirit and that the dictatorships which dominated his present would be replaced by a tomorrow in which Europe would be free and united.

Such vision, conceived on a barren island, surrounded by jailers, at a time when Fascism seemed triumphant and invincible, could only have come from a man cast in the heroic mould, a man of intellect and action. A rare combination. It was on that island that the ideal of European federalism was born.

On release, he founded the federalist movement and entered Italian politics. His middle career as a national politician and European Commissioner gave a new dimension to his political activism and it was as a Commissioner that I first met him.

I had been appointed Political Director of the Labour Party in May 1967 and had become General Secretary within a year. As happened to many young men of promise in those days, I was invited to join the Irish Council of the European Movement by that remarkable man, Denis Corboy, who single handedly managed the movement's affairs here in Dublin. We became friends, and allies, and remain so.

In the run-up to the referendum on Ireland's membership of the European Economic Community, it was obvious that my party would oppose membership and in a desperate effort to change some minds at least, Denis proposed that I should invite Spinelli to address the party membership.

Given his credentials I jumped at the idea, got agreement to hold a Consultative Conference on the EEC, made all the arrangements, invited Spinelli to speak and met with him for the first time in Denis's office the evening before the Conference.

I warmed to him at once. His eyes danced, his smile was infectious and his presence was overwhelming. He filled the room. In short, he had what the Greeks so admired, charisma. We talked for hours and I found him enthralling. Alas, most of my comrades stuck with their belief that the EEC was a capitalist plot, or even the resurrection of Fascism, and were unmoved by the eloquence of his address the next morning.

The party went on to oppose the referendum but accepted the verdict of the people when they voted for membership in 1972 and so, as General Secretary, I found myself even more involved in the activities of the Confederation of Socialist Parties within the EEC. This meant meeting with Commissioners from time to time, including Spinelli, who seemed to forgive my failure at persuading my comrades to sign up for Europe.

I knew that he had become a member of the first directly elected European Parliament in 1979 and had bumped into him in Strasbourg on party business. I was aware of something called the Crocodile Club and followed the progress of the ad-hoc Committee on Institutional Affairs which he had initiated but I had no idea of the scale of what he was at until, by accident, I became a member of the Parliament in 1983. I became one of four Labour Party MEPs.

He immediately recruited me as an ally, and I was glad to volunteer. I had arrived by an extraordinary co-incidence with the publication of the Albert and Ball Report on the revival of the European economy. The Parliament pulsed with the excitement of a report that pointed to a way out of the economic inertia in which Europe had found itself and to the re-launch of the ideal. It was all the work of Spinelli.

Forging the European ideal

What he had done here was to marry the democratic mandate of the first directly elected European Parliament with the concrete needs of a Europe which had economically floundered. He had invited all the newly elected members to join with him in re-launching Europe. This took place at a dinner in the Crocodile Restaurant, no less. Armed with his great personal authority and immune from the charge of elitism, he had persuaded Parliament to set up an ad hoc Committee on Institutional Affairs charged with examining the reasons for the economic crisis and exploring the political means of advancing Europe.

The mood of the time was that Europe had failed to exploit the potential of the Common Market and stood in mortal danger of being swamped by the Americans. The best seller of the day was, after all, "The American Challenge" by the great French polemicist, Jean-Jacques Servan-Schreiber.

Nothing is more calculated to galvanise Europe than the threat of an American take-over.

Spinelli's next move was a brilliant stroke, as we call it in Ireland. He got

the Committee to commission a study on Europe's economic woes from two economists, one an English Tory, the other a French Socialist - a perfect combination. It was the publication of their joint report that I had stumbled across on my first week in Strasbourg as a new MEP.

Their key insight was simple but devastating. We were suffering from too little Europe - not too much. Spinelli used it as the springboard to have Parliament pass a resolution that effectively endorsed the completion of work on a Draft Treaty on European Union on which he had been working. It was a huge jump forward in uniting Europe on what was avowedly a federalist basis. In a real sense, it was the final step of the long road from Ventotene to Strasbourg.

I spoke in favour of the resolution in the debate and as I sat down Spinelli turned around from his position in the front bench and nodded his thanks.

In due course, the Draft Treaty on European Union was put before the house and approved by a huge majority. I spoke and voted in favour. But all was not well in the Labour Party group of the four MEPs. I was the only one in favour. My three comrades feared the federalist nature of the proposed Union and were particularly afraid that it would compromise our "traditional policy of neutrality". We had innumerable debates on the matter but my three comrades were adamant on the matter.

I even had Spinelli invited to address the Parliamentary Labour Party and he travelled to Dublin to speak to them, but his

vision of a united Europe met with polite indifference. They were not for turning.

As a last desperate throw of the dice, I suggested that my three comrades and I should meet for lunch in the Members' restaurant immediately prior to the vote. We met, but positions remained unchanged. Just then Spinelli walked into the restaurant. I called him over and explained what was happening. "Altiero", I said, "please explain to my comrades why they should vote for the Draft Treaty". He leaned forward, put his two hands on the table and looked silently at each of the four of us in turn. "Ah, the Irish" he sighed. "We had expected so much: the poetry, the vision, the courage. But what do we find? Pin-striped suited gentlemen. Just like the British. Bah". And he stormed off. That was the end of that.

On the Draft Treaty that afternoon, I voted one way, my three comrades the other. Things were so bad at home that I was invited to appear before the Parliamentary Party and explain why I shouldn't be expelled. I gave what they call a robust defence and was allowed to stay on.

Influence on François Mitterrand

Spinelli had baited the trap with his Draft Treaty and now waited. He was waiting for an approach from President Mitterrand. The Frenchman was an old friend, but one whose dash for economic growth after his election as President had foundered, and whose socialist programme seemed doomed. Spinelli knew that Mitterrand needed a new departure, and that Europe was the answer.

This had been his secret strategy all along. He told me the story afterwards. Mitterrand had responded to Parliament's initiative on the Treaty, invited him to a private dinner in Paris and had asked him for his advice as to what he should do next to revive his fortunes. "Re-launch Europe" was the immediate reply.

"Did you have the piece of paper?" I asked, remembering Monnet's advice that one should always have a proposition ready in writing when the crucial moment came. He smiled and said "Of course". "And how much of it did he read out later"? "Most of it", he answered.

What had happened is part of history. Mitterrand had taken Spinelli's advice and undertook to re-launch Europe in a dramatic speech before the European Parliament in May 1984 at the conclusion of the French Presidency. Up to this point, the French Socialist Party had strongly opposed any movement towards closer integration and there had been bitter clashes within the Socialist Group between themselves and the Italians on the work of the Institutional Affairs Committee. As Mitterrand's message began to unfold in the Chamber, my French comrades went into shock while the rest of the members, or most of them, began to bubble with excitement at the realisation of what Mitterrand was doing.

It was, as always, a magnificent oratorical performance, reaching a crescendo in which he commended the Draft Treaty and signalled that France would again lead Europe forwards. He finished to a prolonged standing ovation and Europe was truly re-launched, for without French

leadership there could be no move forward. Mitterrand was as good as his word.

Shortly afterwards at the European Council in Fontainebleau he got agreement from his fellow heads of State and government to set up a Committee of their personal representatives to outline the options and propose a pathway forward.

The Committee was chaired by Professor Jim Dooge as Garret FitzGerald's representative and the report which bears his name, The Dooge Report, is probably Ireland's greatest ever contribution to the process of European integration. Its adoption by the European Council led to the first Inter-Governmental Conference since Messina and to the adoption of a series of Treaty amendments in the Single European Act of 1985.

Its most significant innovation was the introduction of Qualified Majority Voting for the purposes of advancing the proper functioning of the Single Market by way of Article 100A. It seems prosaic and too technical to excite attention, but this simple device, the polar opposite of the Luxembourg Compromise that had paralysed Europe, gave Delors the means of creating the Single Market by 1992. More importantly, it gave him the legal basis, and the political mandate, for immediately starting work on Economic and Monetary Union, which was achieved at Maastricht in 1992.

Architect of a new Europe.

Spinelli's elaborate game of chess had worked to perfection. His sense of timing was impeccable. His understanding of how to create and sustain political momentum

was unimpeachable. His orchestration of people and events was masterful. In the directly elected Parliament he had found the stage perfectly suited to his personality and political skills. "This Parliament must be allowed to dream", explained my friend, Paolo Falcone, who had worked previously worked for Spinelli in Rome and was now the Secretary General of the Socialist Group. He meant that the directly elected parliamentarians had to be allowed to reach for the impossible.

Spinelli had understood that before anybody else and had orchestrated the realisation of the dream. Quite simply, nobody else could have achieved what he had accomplished with this new institution in the space of six years. Without him, there would have been no framework within which to absorb a united Germany, peacefully without disruption, no way to return the lost democracies of Central and Eastern Europe to their proper home, no means of creating Economic and Monetary Union and no foundation for building what we now call the European Union.

Truly, it can be said, that he was the architect of a new Europe.

In his speech on the Draft Treaty, he invoked the unforgettable short story of Ernest Hemingway, "The Old Man and the Sea", in which the old fisherman succeeds in a lifetime ambition to catch the great fish which he straps to the side of his boat and heads for port, only for it to be eaten piece by piece as he makes his way home.

When the old man puts into port there is nothing left but bones.

Don't let the same thing happen to the Draft Treaty, warned Spinelli. But that's what did happen, of course. Yet as the past twenty-five years has unfolded, the flesh has been gradually replaced and someday soon the fish will be made whole again and the old man's dream realised.

The beauty of the story is that in old age Spinelli had grown a beard; it was snow white, its colour betraying his age. He seemed the personification of Hemingway's memorable and undaunted character.

Spinelli's greatest achievement had come at the end of his life. Sometimes it is the way the gods reward a life of endeavour. That unbreakable and unbroken man had triumphed over unspeakable evil and had constructed a Europe that would be free and united.

He is Italy's greatest son and one of Europe's greatest sons, a saviour when it needed courage, belief and, above all, optimism.

It was a privilege to have known him. It is right to salute him on this solemn occasion, the anniversary of when Europe was called into being.

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