

The role of Altiero Spinelli on the path towards European Union

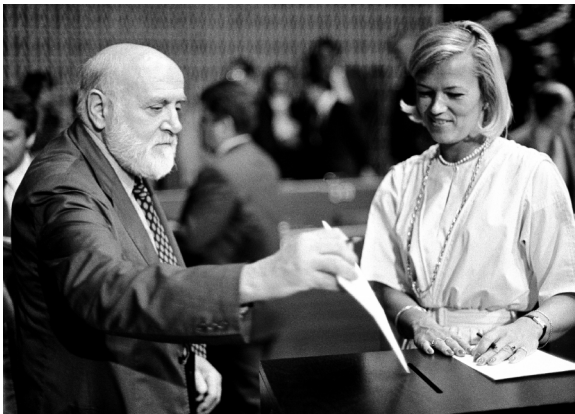
'I would like to end my life fighting for Europe'

SUMMARY

On 14 February 1984, the European Parliament debated and adopted the draft 'Treaty establishing the European Union', also known as the 'Spinelli Draft' after the rapporteur-coordinator of the parliamentary committee that drafted the text. Two years later, on 23 May 1986, Altiero Spinelli died in Rome. Now, 30 years on, Spinelli and the draft treaty he championed are considered to be key elements in the European Union's integration process. Yet the draft treaty was just the culmination of the political career of Spinelli – a man who was able to imagine a united Europe even before the European Community was born.

The way Spinelli's thinking and work developed can be better understood if we consider first the arguments set out in the Ventotene Manifesto and then his activities in the European Federalist Movement, right up until his entry into the European institutions as a Commissioner and then Member of the European Parliament.

Not only did this Italian politician, during his career, live through the various stages of European integration, he often anticipated them. He pursued the goal of establishing a political union between the countries of Europe with determination and confidence to the very end. The final step was to be taken within the institution that Spinelli had always considered to be the most representative and best suited to playing a leading role in the integration process – the European Parliament.



Altiero Spinelli, 1984.

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Chronology

1907	Altiero Spinelli born in Rome on 31 August
1937-1939	Internment on the island of Ponza and expulsion from the Communist Party
1939-1943	Internment on the island of Ventotene
1941	First draft of the <i>Ventotene Manifesto</i> ; the final edition was published in 1944
1943	First meeting of the European Federalist Movement
1950	Schuman Declaration, leading to the establishment of the European Coal and Steel Community (ECSC)
1957	Signing in Rome of the Treaty establishing the European Economic Community (EEC) and the Treaty establishing the European Atomic Energy Community (Euratom), both of which entered into force on 1 January 1958
1970	Spinelli appointed Member of the European Commission
1976	Resignation of Spinelli from the Commission in May to join the Italian delegation in the European Parliament in July
1984	Adoption by the European Parliament of the Draft Treaty establishing the European Union on 14 February
1986	Signing in February, in Luxembourg and The Hague, of the Single European Act, which entered into force on 1 July 1987
1986	Altiero Spinelli dies in Rome on 23 May

From Ventotene to the Commission

One man and his manifesto

One of the most important and difficult moments in the life of Altiero Spinelli came after his release from the island of Ventotene, where he had been interned alongside other opponents of the Fascist regime. After the death of Spinelli in Rome on 23 May 1986, Mario Albertini, Chair of the European Federalist Movement, recalled how at that moment ‘he was alone: all his anti-Fascist friends were returning to Italy where a tradition was waiting for them in which they could take their place: they had a party to which they could relate, an ideology to guide their thinking and, above all, a State, that is a power structure, within which they could carry on their political activity.’¹ Spinelli himself, in a few pages of his diaries, expresses this loneliness, but also mentions the presence of a firm foundation, in his pocket, from which to start all over again: the Ventotene Manifesto.

The federalist Europe and the distinction between progressive and conservative forces

It is impossible to explain the human and political process that led Spinelli to his Draft Treaty establishing the European Union, one of the cornerstones of the EU's process of integration and development, without starting from the Manifesto. Drawn up with his friends Ernesto Rossi and Eugenio Colorni on the island on which they had been interned, Spinelli had found that which he himself described as the compass that guided him forever on the rough seas of politics.

During the winter of 1940-1941, Spinelli proposed to Rossi that they should write a ‘manifesto for a free and united Europe’, the full title of the text known as the Ventotene Manifesto. The text was divided into four chapters:

- The crisis of modern civilisation
- Post-war duties – European unity
- Post-war duties – Social reform
- The revolutionary situation: old and new trends.

After reiterating that responsibility for the conflicts that had repeatedly undermined the fundamental values of European civilisation lay in the existence of national, sovereign states, the text put forward two policy proposals of the utmost importance: to transform the idea of a European federation into concrete political action and no longer to distinguish between conservative and progressive parties on the basis of their domestic policy programmes but according to whether or not they subscribed to the European federal project.²

Confederalism, federalism and functionalism to unite Europe

The methods used in the European unification process were not, however, uniform. The federalism favoured by Spinelli was only one of three main strands that formed the basis of the integration process and with which he dealt at different times.

- *Confederalism* provided for agreements between states in relation to cooperation that was as full as possible, but without affecting national sovereignty. Decisions would require unanimity among members.
- *Federalism*, which included several different strands, sought to move beyond the concept of nation states, which were responsible for continuing conflict in Europe, and to establish a European federation which would have its own sovereignty.
- *Functionalism* was based on the belief that the process of integration could only take place gradually, through the gradual transfer of sovereignty in specific areas. This was the model embraced by Jean Monnet and Robert Schuman.³

A citizens' parliament for Europe

The Congress of Europe held in The Hague in May 1948, chaired by Winston Churchill, saw the confederalist approach prevail, though subsequently it was functionalism which asserted itself. The early development of the European institutions began on that basis, contrary to what Spinelli had hoped for. The Italian federalist was indeed one of the first to recognise the limits of the essentially consultative role taken on by the parliamentary assemblies, and the importance of the vote of the people when it came to adopting a European constitution and giving parliamentary power some legitimacy.

A Europe of the people remained one of Spinelli's main goals. In order to achieve it, institutional reforms that placed the focus on a European Parliament elected by direct universal suffrage and with a permanent constituent role were needed. It was also clear to Spinelli how those reforms could be achieved – through the European Commission.

The role of Commissioner (1970-1975)

In his *Diario europeo* (European Diary), Spinelli, referring to his appointment as European Commissioner responsible for industrial policy, research and technological development and the Joint Research Centre, showed that he had very clear ideas about his role: 'Over the next four years I shall have to be able to do something for Europe after having talked so much about it. It's now or never.'⁴

Clarification of the duties of, and relations between, the Commission, Council of Ministers and Parliament remained a key issue as far as reform was concerned. The Commission was to be granted the role of supranational body *par excellence* and was to mediate between the

other two Community institutions. In order to achieve that goal, Spinelli moved towards confederalist ideas, recognising that the establishment of a European Union would take time. Initially, Spinelli supported the *Pompidou plan*,⁵ a plan for European political union drawn up by the French president, which did not rule out supranationalism on some common points; he later decided, however, to propose his own plan for a European confederation.⁶

The draft reform of the European institutions

The importance of this draft, explained initially to the Commission and subsequently to the Socialist Group in the European Parliament, lay in its innovative strength.

The main points expressed in the Spinelli draft were: the strengthening of the powers of the Commission and the Council, in recognition of the EEC as a framework for any subsequent form of political union; the introduction of the principle of co-decision between the Council and Parliament in legislative and budgetary matters; the election of Parliament by direct universal suffrage with proportional representation, and the establishment of a European government that was independent of national governments.

It was an ambitious plan with a number of its points, taken up later, now central features of the institutional framework of the European Union today. At the same time, however, it was a plan that was too innovative to be accepted immediately by the Commission and the Parliament.

The adoption of direct elections and Spinelli's resignation from the Commission

The summits of Paris in 1972 and Copenhagen in 1973 highlighted the contradictions that still existed within the EEC. While, on the one hand, the urgent need for meaningful reforms was felt, on the other, there was a lack of initiative in making effective decisions, which called the Community system into question.

Another summit in Paris, in 1974, sanctioned the adoption of direct suffrage and the call to draw up a report on the possibility of establishing a European Union. Spinelli asked for the Commission to be involved in drawing up the report, and his request was accepted. This was one of the most important achievements of his tenure as Commissioner. Further to the European Council's decision to hold the first European elections, however, in May 1976 he chose to resign in order to pursue his activity as a reformer within the institution in which he had always believed the most – the European Parliament.

Early parliamentary activities (1976-1979)

A constituent parliament for the European Union

Entry into the European Parliament represented the squaring of the circle of Spinelli's political and human journey. To accede to Parliament, pending the direct elections of 1979, he had to find a party that would first offer him the opportunity to stand as a national member of parliament. In 1976, in fact, it was still the parliaments of the Member States that appointed European delegates. This was the main reason for his return to the ranks of the Italian Communist Party (PCI), from which he had been expelled in 1937. Thanks to his election to the Italian Chamber of Deputies, therefore, Spinelli was appointed a European delegate in July 1976, as one of the Independent members of the Communist Group.

Again, Spinelli decided to take up his post starting with clear and specific objectives. He acknowledged that Parliament's role was vital, calling it 'the institution that was the most independent of governmental choices, the one which had consistently been the most capable of developing transnational groupings of political forces, the one that was the most

imbued with European spirit and had been the most resolute in calling for a limitation of national sovereignty and for supranational development.⁷ For that reason, Parliament was the institution best suited to implementing the integration process. The main goal remained that of supplementing the role of institutional guide with that of constituent body.⁸ This role, in any case, would become legitimised once and for all by the direct elections of 1979.

As a member of three committees (Political Affairs, Budgets, and Economic and Monetary Affairs), Spinelli embarked on his first parliamentary term preparing for the time when, as an elected MEP, he would take specific action on the reforms required with a view to drafting a European constitution.

A Life for Europe

In March 1979, Spinelli sent a letter to Enrico Berlinguer, General Secretary of the Communist Party (PCI), openly asking to be a candidate for the European Parliament in the first direct elections of 10 June. He wrote:

‘I should like you to bear in mind that I would like to end my life fighting for Europe, and therefore I would not like to miss the opportunity to go to the elected European Parliament. I think I can reasonably expect you to include me on your party lists, because that would be in your interest too.’⁹

The PCI confirmed the inclusion of Spinelli on its lists and he was subsequently elected in the constituency of north-western Italy (Piemonte, Valle d'Aosta, Liguria, Lombardia).¹⁰

The Crocodile Club (1980) and the Draft Treaty on European Union

Parliament's vote against the budgetary procedure for 1980

The opportunity to push Parliament towards reform came a few months after the elections. Appointed vice-chair of the Budgets Committee, Spinelli achieved a great political feat during the parliamentary debates on the 1980 budget.¹¹ Criticising the budget in question, highlighting the fact that Parliament's opinion was merely a formality and that the Council had ignored the views expressed by Parliament, Spinelli convinced the majority of MEPs to vote against the text:

‘Now, I address my colleagues in Parliament, inviting them to reflect on the need to change this Community of ours. There are only two centres of political will that can take on the responsibility of preparing reform plans and asking national parliaments to ratify them. If the governments do it, we will have a Europe of borders ... Alternatively, this Parliament will have to realise that, as the representative of all the European citizens who elected it, it is up to it to propose institutional reforms that are able to get the Community out of this impasse.’¹²

This was a symbolic gesture without any technical repercussions, but precisely for that reason it highlighted the great contradiction between a Parliament that is legitimised by the vote of the people and its lack of power in the Community system. This gesture woke Parliament up, for the first time, to the fact that it would have to act if it was to secure reform.

The Crocodile Club

The debate on reform continued, among MEPs, even outside Parliament's chambers. To raise awareness among colleagues and discuss institutional reforms and the need to create an ad hoc working party to develop them, Spinelli, once again, in a letter dated 25 June 1980, said:

‘If there are colleagues who, like me, have come to the conclusion that the reform of the institutions is too important to be left in the hands of statesmen and diplomats, I would appreciate it if they could answer this letter and agree to attend meetings in which we will together look at the best ways of involving Parliament in this action.’¹³

The proposal was initially accepted by eight MEPs who, on the evening of 9 July 1980, met to hold talks at the restaurant *Au Crocodile* in Strasbourg.¹⁴ Within a few months, the group of MEPs led by Spinelli – which took the name Crocodile Club, named after the venue of the first meeting – grew significantly in size. Its members worked tirelessly to draw up a motion for a resolution for the establishment of an ad hoc committee, ‘responsible for making proposals on the current state and future development of the Community’.¹⁵ Signed by 180 MEPs, the motion was then tabled at the July 1981 plenary part-session and adopted on 9 July.¹⁶ Ultimately, therefore, the Crocodile Club, mentioned by Spinelli during the debate,¹⁷ had kept its promises, paving the way for the Draft Treaty establishing the European Union.

Resolution on the European Parliament's position

The Institutional Committee began its work in January 1982 and Altiero Spinelli was appointed rapporteur-coordinator. The first task was to draw up a report on the European Parliament's position concerning the reform of the Treaties and the achievement of the European Union.¹⁸ The report, which sought to illustrate, first and foremost, the aims of the committee, was presented by Spinelli on 5 July 1982 during the plenary session:

‘What we lack is an adequate European institutional system able to mould the common feeling into a common political will through a joint effort to find the necessary compromises.’

The formation of a common will, therefore, was a key element for continuing along the road to reform. Voting in favour of the resolution would signal ‘the beginning of a democratic political battle for the Europe of the 1980s, for a Europe made by Europeans for Europeans’. The resolution was adopted by 258 to 35, with 23 abstentions.¹⁹

The Draft Treaty

After the adoption of Parliament's position, the work of the Institutional Committee with a view to drafting a proposal for a resolution ‘on the substance of the preliminary draft Treaty establishing the European Union’ continued for a year. The results were presented to Parliament on 13 September 1983 and adopted the following day.²⁰ Having secured the approval of Parliament, the preliminary draft was debated in the chamber on 14 February 1984.²¹

The Draft Treaty consisted of 87 articles that sought to supplement and amend the previous treaties establishing the European Communities with regard to its institutions, policy and financial management, in addition to determining the aims, methods of action and powers (*competences*) of the European Union. The resolution introduced the very concept of European Union, a union vested with legal personality; it highlighted the idea of European citizens as active participants in decision-making; it enshrined the principle of subsidiarity, according to which powers were to be divided between the Union and the Member States, and it reaffirmed the primacy of EU law over that of the Member States.²²

With regard to the objectives of the Union, the committee focused particularly on: the elimination of regional imbalances; protection of the environment and cultural heritage; scientific research with a view to the advancement of European peoples; the achievement of economic progress within the framework of a free internal market; currency stability; the

promotion of international relations; the free movement of people and ideas; and the defence and development of human rights.

To achieve those goals, the joint action of the European institutions was needed, with a rebalancing of powers through the strengthening of Parliament and the Commission, and the principle of cooperation among Member States through the Council.

At the end of the presentation, the Draft Treaty, 'submitted by the Committee on Institutional Affairs, which is based on the experience of 30 years of Community activities and on the manifest need to progress beyond the current degree of unity', was adopted by Parliament by 237 votes to 31, with 43 abstentions.²³

The political testament of Altiero Spinelli

Despite Parliament's approval, however, the draft treaty was gradually swept under the carpet in the interinstitutional debate. Yet again, the innovative strength of Spinelli's political action had been too far ahead of its time, and could not bear immediate fruit. The revision of the treaties enshrined in the Single European Act turned out to be unsatisfactory as regards what had been proposed in the draft treaty of the Committee on Institutional Affairs, coordinated by the Italian MEP.

'Ladies and gentlemen, when we voted on the draft Treaty of Union, I mentioned to you the short story by Hemingway about the old fisherman who catches the biggest fish in his life, which then gets eaten up by sharks so that he arrives home with only the bones of the fish. Well, we have arrived home too, and all we have left are the bones of the fish. This is no reason for Parliament to give up the struggle. We have to get ready to venture out again, with better tackle to catch our fish and to save it from the sharks.'²⁴

Altiero Spinelli died in Rome on 23 May 1986. He missed the opportunity in life to receive recognition for the scope of his ideas and his political action. However, the determination that emerged from his words hinted at the knowledge that sooner or later such recognition would be given. And so it was. 30 years after the adoption of the Draft Treaty, Altiero Spinelli and the work done by the Committee on Institutional Affairs coordinated by him are considered to have had a vital influence on the process of building the European Union.

Endnotes

- ¹ *Battling for the Union, Altiero Spinelli 1979-1986*, European Parliament, Office for Official Publications of the European Communities, Luxembourg, 1988, p. 50.
- ² 'The dividing line between progressive and reactionary parties no longer follows the formal line of greater or lesser democracy, or of more or less socialism to be instituted; rather the division falls along the line, very new and substantial, that separates the party members into two groups. The first is made up of those who conceive the essential purpose and goal of struggle is the ancient one, that is, the conquest of national political power ... The second are those who see as the main purpose the creation of a solid international state.' Spinelli, A., Rossi, E., *The Manifesto of Ventotene*, preface by Eugenio Colorni, Mondadori, Milan 2006.
- ³ Galasso, G., 'Altiero Spinelli, l'Italia e il processo d'integrazione europea, 1979-1986', degree thesis in *Sources for Diplomatic History*, University of Bari, rapporteur Luciano Monzali, 2011/2012, pp. 45-46.
- ⁴ Spinelli, A., *Diario europeo 1970-1976*, edited by Paolini, E., Il Mulino, Bologna, 1991, diary entry written on 29 June 1970.
- ⁵ Spinelli, A., 'Le plan Pompidou pour l'Europe: une chance à saisir', *Le Monde*, 30 March 1971.
- ⁶ Graglia, P. S., *Altiero Spinelli*, Il Mulino, Bologna 2008, p. 523.
- ⁷ *ibid.*
- ⁸ On the relationship between Spinelli and the process of constitutionalisation of the European Union, cfr. *Altiero Spinelli - federalista europeo*, European Parliament, Brussels, 2009.

- ⁹ Letter from Spinelli to Berlinguer, 1 March 1979, in *Europeismo e democrazia: Altiero Spinelli e la sinistra europea 1950-1986*, by Pasquinucci, D., Il Mulino, Bologna 2000, p. 309.
- ¹⁰ Galasso, G., *Altiero Spinelli*, op. cit., p. 97.
- ¹¹ Cfr. A. Spinelli, *Discorsi al Parlamento europeo 1976-1986*, Dastoli, P. V., Il Mulino, Bologna 1987, pp. 180-221.
- ¹² Speech by Altiero Spinelli, Debates of the European Parliament of 21 May 1980, p. 139.
- ¹³ Letter sent on 25 June 1980 by Altiero Spinelli to his colleagues at the European Parliament, Historical Archives of the European Union, Fond A.S.H.A., dossier AS-356, 02 'Club du Crocodile'.
- ¹⁴ Those who attended the first meeting, for which minutes were taken by Spinelli's assistant, Pier Virgilio Dastoli, were: Hans August Lücker, Karl von Wogau and Paola Gaiotti De Biase (Group of the European People's Party [Christian Democratic Group]), Stanley P. Johnson (European Democratic Group), Richard Balfe and Brian Key (Socialist Group), Bruno Visentini (Liberal and Democratic Group) and Silvio Leonardi (Communist Group and associates). Cfr. Graglia, P., *Altiero Spinelli*, op. cit., p. 600.
- ¹⁵ Motion for a resolution on the setting up of an ad hoc committee to draw up proposals concerning the progress and development of the Community, Historical Archives of the European Parliament, PE1 AP PR B1-0889/80 0010.
- ¹⁶ Resolution setting up a committee on institutional problems, OJ C 234 of 14 September 1981, p. 48. The resolution was adopted by 164 votes to 24, with 12 abstentions.
- ¹⁷ Speech by Altiero Spinelli, Debates of the European Parliament of 7 July 1981, p. 75-76.
- ¹⁸ Report on the European Parliament's position concerning the reform of the Treaties and the achievement of the European Union, Historical Archives of the European Parliament, PE1 AP RP/INST.1981 A1-0305/82 0010, PE1 AP RP/INST 1981 A10305/82 0020 and PE1 AP RP/INST.1981 A1-0305/82 0030.
- ¹⁹ Resolution on the European Parliament's position concerning the reform of the Treaties and the achievement of the European Union (A1-0305/82), OJ C 238, 13 September 1982, pp. 25-28.
- ²⁰ Report drawn up on behalf of the Committee on Institutional Affairs on the substance of the preliminary draft Treaty establishing the European Union, Historical Archives of the European Parliament, PE1 AP RP/INST.1981 A1-0575/83 0010.
- ²¹ Debates of the European Parliament on the European Union, 14 February 1984, 1-309, pp. 26-58 and 72-110.
- ²² [The road to the 1984 Spinelli Report.](#)
- ²³ Resolution on the draft Treaty establishing the European Union, OJ C 77, 19 March 1984, pp. 53-54.
- ²⁴ Altiero Spinelli, speaking on 16 January 1986; *Battling for the Union*, op. cit., p. 44.

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Manuscript completed in September 2016, Luxembourg © European Union 2016.

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