

Europe Conference in the Ridderzaal
“Samen sinds 1957”

Verslag van Boudewijn van Vijfhuizen – Marnix College Ede

Up early on the 9th of march, a promising day, off to The Hague for a conference organised by the first chamber on Europe, commemorating and celebrating the official fifty years of the existence of Europe, or the signing of the treaty of Rome, which in turn has led to the Europe we live in today. After an hour and something in the train, and some miniature troubles (which will not be mentioned) we arrived in The Hague, and we had a comfortable stroll to the “Ridderzaal” where the conference would be held.

10:00, after an hour of not much, the conference(or event/ happening) finally started, with an opening speech by the chairman of the first chamber Mrs. Timmerman-Buck. She started by pointing out, as many did, that Europe basically started a peace mission, a vow for no more war, and that led to the longest period of peace in Europe, so far. She also brought forward that the countries and regions have a place to unfold and blossom in the European society, using her example as Belgium, which is not just a country, but a member state (as many others), a part of something bigger, many small regions are now part of something bigger and more international, thanks to the EU they have a chance to unfold.

The chairman(female) also made it clear that even though a globalisation rush is taking the world by storm (or better said, has taken the world by storm), it hasn't stopped Europe from staying within it's borders, and that is indeed what Europe is compared to, a castle on a hill, which is the best defended and alone standing castle, that doesn't interact much with the other castles or kingdoms around it, but according to many this is changing.

Yes, there was still more, and perhaps one of the most talked thing and which was to, or will still affect us, the constitution. Mrs. Timmerman-Buck, so subtly, quoted Barroso who made the point of asking (rhetorically): “ What does the Netherlands want if it doesn't want the constitution?” I suppose we're left at a loss of words. Mrs. Timmerman-Buck at least mentioned that the fact that nearly all of the other countries agreed with the constitution that it meant that the people wanted it a 100%, they weren't really given a choice. She closed her speech with words about the Dutch government, who in her eyes, needed more openness in the debates about Europe, and it's future in the Netherlands, we needed to get more involved.

10:25, Mr. Eyskens, former prime minister of Belgium, and involved with a lot of Europe affairs, was up for his speech, and from the first line said, you could tell that he was experienced in how to present something.

Starting off his keynote with a short anecdote, as a lot of experienced speaker. The former Belgian prime minister recalled himself reading a detective novel that started off in the same Ridderzaal we sat in, and being a detective novel, there had to be a cause for investigation, so a giant chandelier came crashing down upon the people sitting beneath it, the anecdote was followed by quite some laughs and some anxious glances towards the chandeliers.

Mr. Eyskens, got straight to business after his anecdote, confessing that he though as well that Europe was a wreck at the moment, suffering from lack of leadership, and I quote: “Onze leiders zijn drijvende luchtballonen,” referring to the

fact that it seems like many of the leaders of the EU-states seem to be somewhere else, not really focused on Europe and its' matters. Eyskens contributed to our ever expanding knowledge as well, that a referendum is a governments quick way to crumble itself. However, I'm not completely sure with his last point, though it might be fully correct, I do not believe necessarily that a referendum is demolishing, it gives a sense of unity to the people of that certain nation, and the people united is a strong force to be reckoned with.

"There are three to four fundaments against the European Union," according to Eyskens. First of all, the greed of politicians, who in turn let us place all the mistakes, no matter what they are, at Brussels doorstep, blaming Europe, as it is the biggest thing to blame, and everyone at that point is certain that Europe is the culprit behind all the wrong doings. For example the aging "syndrome" the European fear, the process in which the population of a country gradually loses it's younger population, yet the next generation is not yet up to task of taking over. Due to misinformation, the blame for this placed in Europe's hands, while technically Europe can't do anything about it. This is what lead to the next point, there is too much demagogy in Europe, and hardly any pedagogy, we need to be taught and educated about Europe, not misinformed, we shouldn't be left to let our opinions be moulded into forms that some politicians want them to be, we should be able to form our own conclusions, which is only possible if we are correctly educated and informed.

The next fundament against Europe is the potential over representation of Europe with all it's member states. Every parliament plays a role with the European Commission and the European Parliament, in total there are over ten thousand members of parliament, this being all the European Member States together.

Arguably globalization is also a fundamental issue against the EU, the world is more open to practically everything. We are so connected to others that it seems a European Union is something we don't really need, we are already united due to globalization and the mass changes over the past years, scientifically and technologically, have brought us even closer. "The world will become our village, changes will happen so fast we will not even notice them. In this era we will experience even more change, we will experience the change of change."

But what has brought these fundamental issues upon us? "Our opinion is the lack of political representation of Europe in our own member state. Every member state has not yet understood that we have been living on the boundary of the old and new Europe for ten years. The old Europe, with the cold war, the Berlin wall, defensive, and locked up. The new Europe open, free of locks, expanding, offensive. Yet a lot of us don not under the consequences of living like this." Eyskens so promptly put it. "The Europe of tomorrow is a Europe of great ideals, no nationalism, yet not a big Europe, the Europe of tomorrow, the Europe in thirty years will only house about five percent of the world's population.

Europe stand on four pillars, each of them is fundamental for a good and prosperous Europe.

- First of all pluralistic democracy, meaning that one who thinks differently isn't the one with wrong thoughts, differences should only be a factor that will help us unite.
- The second pillar of Europe, or the European Union is the competitive and socially economic market: "A social life can not be built on a economic graveyard," Eyskens explained.

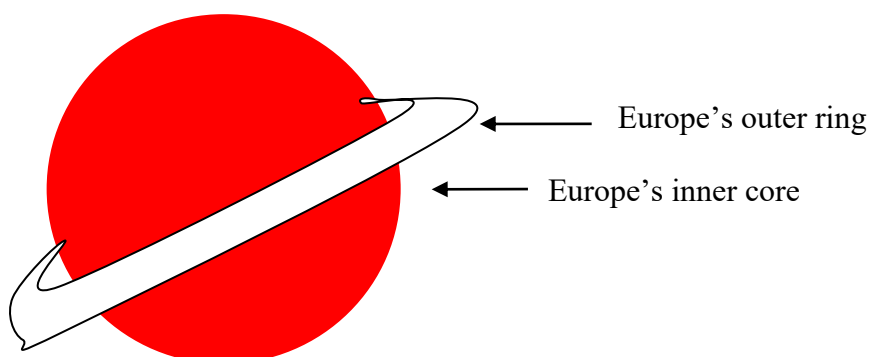
- Our third pillar is justice. The European court functions well and has a clear view of what is going on in Europe, and is able to keep to its standards of justice.
- Last, but not least, the fourth pillar is our standard of welfare, the social security, which provides solidarity and shows we do have a grain of compassion for the people around us.

Europe is not expensive, as the also former minister of finance stated. Only a few cents extra a year on tax could finance the European budget. Europe would only cost us about two percent of the state taxes a year, a fraction compared to what some of the tax goes to in some of the member states. Europe is affordable, something many people don't know, and don't seem interested in.

Then the former prime minister moved on to a subject most of the European citizens seem to know something about, as they are confronted with it openly: the expanding Europe Union, and Turkey was the focus. Yet, what about Turkey, join or not? Turkey was the east, yes, but its European history dates longer than all its others, it was part of the Byzantine Empire after all. Why wouldn't it be able to join if the criteria were met, we let Romania and Bulgaria join even though they did not fully comply to the Copenhagen criteria, yet we didn't seem to have a problem trusting them they would make up for it. Mr Eyskens also brought up the peculiar thought that is might say no to Turkey, even though it is in line with the criteria we have placed on them, we might get a "backlash", the radicalism might prompt certain individuals to do something. By saying "Yes" to Turkey we would be saying yes to the Islam.

Eyskens compared his view of Europe with the planet of Saturn, the big mass of the actually planet forming the core, the core of Europe, which has its power spread over the Paris London and Berlin, the biggest cities of Europe. The Europe in which the pound works with the Euro and the British are fully on our side as well, not only on their lone island. Yet Saturn has a ring as well, this ring would be the other part of Europe, the countries who are not (yet) fully present in the core, yet are still in some way bonded to the Europe of the European Union, in the open market for example. This would be a great opportunity for countries as Turkey, according to Eyskens, and Turkey would slowly but surely work its way up.

Put short, the former Belgian prime-minister was a man of many words, but many thought out words, he knew like no other what was possible though hard work and what not, though it seems like what he wants to see is too optimistic, as he himself said it: "an optimist is a bad informed pessimist". The actions Mr. Eyskens plans to see in the future might just be the things needed for Europe, we might be the ones depended on those actions, and why wait for them to come when we can make them possible?



Onto the debates on the themes which were wet out for us, or for the students of the invited universities to participate in. At the beginning of every theme everyone would vote “Yes” or “No” (Yea or Nay) on the subject, the debate would then take place and afterwards there was another round of voting

Theme I: All European citizens should be educated in the ideals and values of Europe

Main Argument on the Yea side: “Yes, because it is fundamental to the population of the European Union to know to what types of norms and values they should keep themselves.”

Main Argument on the Nay side: “No, there are no clear norms and values when it comes to Europe and the European Union.”

	<u>Yea (%)</u>	<u>Nay (%)</u>
Before	57.5	42,5
After:	57.9	42,1

Theme II : The European Union should introduce a B-Membership, only integrating some countries into some aspects of the European Union, comparable to the Ring of Saturn theory.

Main Argument on the Yea side: “The European Union can not absorb any more countries, there is simply not enough leadership and capacity, this is an option in which some countries can profit with their economy but the main European Core does not have to worry about all the other aspects of that certain country. B-Membership or No-Membership.

Main Argument on the Nay side: “Basically discrimination, the Copenhagen criteria was not set up for no reason, the B-Membership is a discontented idea, and will not work, it promotes the idea that there is an A-Membership, the “first class” of Europe.”

-Both sides agreed that the term “B-Membership” was not acceptable.

	<u>Yea (%)</u>	<u>Nay (%)</u>
Before:	37,1	62,9
After:	31,1	68,9

After all of this there was time for lunch, the groups were separated, we were leaded to a different room away from the people with the white badges, the more official, and we had some sandwiches complimentary of the house, or the caterer.

During lunch we made our way back to the Ridderzaal where we were met with one of the organisers and member of the first chamber who informed us Mr. Van de Lynden requested to speak with us, or had requested to meet Mrs. Vissers. We were escorted down to where the others were having lunch and were introduced to Mr. van de Lynden. After the praise we received from Mr. Van de Lynden we decided to approach Mrs. Timmerman-Buck, in the hope of asking her a question which was actually meant for Mr. Eyskens, but we were not granted the opportunity to ask that question.

The question posed by us to Mrs. Timmerman-Buck was a question in reference to Mr. Eyskens speech, being: “ Do you think it will be possible to get to a unified peaceful, loving Europe, if political parties such as Vlaams Blok and Partij van de Vrijheid seem to work against a Europe of Unity?” Mrs. Timmerman-Buck explained to us that that was life, there would always be people opposing things, even if they are for the better of us all. She explained furthermore that it was better that these people do it in public and are not suppressed, because that would only lead to anger and even more rebellion.

Back to the “Ridderzaal” for more listening and voting. We were expecting to head straight on to the next themes when it appeared we were just going to get some Yes/No question, for no reason, just for fun.

	<u>Yea (%)</u>	<u>Nay (%)</u>
Europe own army:	59.5	40.5
Veto rights:	72.4	27.6
Commission Open meetings:	55.6	44.4
Possibility to step out:	70.3	29.7
More discussions about EU in parliament:	89.7	10.3
Replace all national embassies with EU Embassies:	17.7	82.3
One voice in UN:	66.4	33.6
Euro good for us:	87.5	12.5
More tax to EU:	64.5	35.9
English as language:	41.4	58.6

EU flag next to national flag and EU Anthem:

37.7 62.3

No more Strasbourg:

88.7 11.3

Belgium as federal state:

83.9 16.1

NL as federal state:

60.5 39.5

Turkey joins:

82 18

Theme III: The Member states should pass on all their energy and environmental authorization unto the EU.

Main Argument Yea side: “This opportunity provides for a better overview of everything and all the processes which have to take place on both levels. The EU can make sure that what needs to be done will be done, and in cooperation, the countries will not just do what they want.”

Main Argument Nay side: “These issues should be arranged on local levels, if the EU is the authorised body it has no idea what is happening on local levels, and things need to be arranged locally because no one wants to work together and it would be a waste.”

	<u>Yea (%)</u>	<u>Nay (%)</u>
Before:	41.5	58.5
After:	55.1	44.9

Theme IV : Europe should become a federal state.

Main Argument Yea side: “Europe already has everything to be a federal state, all the bodies and institutions are in place, what are we waiting for, not much in life will change.”

Main Argument Nay side: “Turning Europe into a federal state is not just a thing to be thought about over night, many things will change, and it will take an obscene amount of work.”

	<u>Yea (%)</u>	<u>Nay (%)</u>
Before:	42.6	57.4
After:	64.4	35.6

- *Note: Might it be people have the wrong idea about a federal state, as America is one and people seem to a preset way of thinking about America and it's manners.*

Another short break, followed by a speech by Mark Mazower, a professor of History at the Columbia University, New York.

The professor started his speech with an abstract question: “What is to live in the present?” Indeed, what is to live in the present, is it a human thing, a slight monstrous attribute which we have at some times that we live in the present. What is the present, according to many the present is the now, and nor the one second ago or the one second to come, but a human being really live in the time frame set by his/her way of thinking that we can live in the here and now, and not refer back to the past and not think about the consequences of the future?

Mr. Mazower also brought up the question if Europe had an identity, as it seems we don't really have some solid object or likeness to cling to throughout the ages. “Geographically Europe is a prolongation of Asia,” so we aren't strictly European from a geographically standpoint. However, according to the professor, there are certain powers that across geographical borders, the power of unification, solidarity, and thought. “The seventeenth and eighteenth century became known for the enlightenment, by the nineteenth century it was the sure, Europe was at the centre of all of this, European/ being a European was the life.

The professor goes on about the colonial spirit of Europe, it's imperialism. The way that the Nazi's redid that on the Europeans themselves, which brought a point of reflection. He painted a glimpse of the future of Europe, and then was asked questions by the audience.

The day was closed by a quick word from Mr. van der Lynden, who thanked everyone for coming and the prizes for the best debaters were handed out to each student who was chosen best in his/her theme, winning a all-in, well taken care of, trip to Strasbourg.

After that the informal reception, everyone relaxed, a long day was over, time to fall back in our old routines again.

I would like to thank Mrs. Vissers for this opportunity in the first place, as well as Mr. van der Linden, on behalf of the first chamber, for making this all possible, thank you very much. My knowledge about Europe has been expanded a little more, and every bit helps. Thank you.