

PENN'S 'SOLICITOUS THOUGHTS' FOR EUROPE

Think of William Penn and you think of Pennsylvania and the 'holy experiment' in Pennsylvania. But Penn had another, lesser known, plan for Europe.

He set it out in his 'solicitous thoughts for the peace of Europe' which he published in 1693. (An extract appears in *Quaker faith and practice* 24.44, and the complete text appears in *The Peace of Europe, the Fruits of Solitude and other writings*, available from the Quaker Bookshop). Many of Penn's ideas are worth re-reading during the 'pause for reflection' following the recent rejections of a European constitution by France and the Netherlands. The attempt to bring European institutions closer to the people by means of a written constitution, is far more binding than anything Penn had in mind. It proposes that Europe should become a single legal entity, which would take over its members' seats on the United Nations and the International Monetary Fund for example. For election purposes, our political parties would be replaced by trans-national ones, operating on a pan-European list system.

Other measures affecting justice and immigration, to name but two, are already in place. They go well beyond William Penn's proposals for peace. As for the surrender of the right to trial by jury and *habeas corpus*, for example, his reaction would not be difficult to imagine given the exceptional Pen-Mead trial of 1670.

Given that his mother was of Dutch extraction and that he himself had studied at the Saumur Protestant Academy in western France, his concern for peace in Europe is not at all surprising. England was at war with France at the time Penn put his ideas on paper and recent events in Europe had been far from peaceful. In the preceding decade, Vienna had been saved from the Turks; the Venetians had bombed Athens, destroying the Parthenon; and the war of the League of Augsburg had begun. 'He must not be a man' wrote Penn. 'but a statue of brass or stone, whose bowels do not melt when he beholds the bloody tragedies of this war, in Hungary, Germany, Flanders, Ireland, and at sea.'

According to Penn, the three reasons for going to war were: first, to keep what is one's right; secondly to recover that which by violence has been lost by the arms of a stronger power; and thirdly to add - by the acquisition of neighbouring territories. His solution was to 'let parliaments rather than arms decide': a Diet in which all European countries could take part.

Penn's European parliament was to consist of ninety members, and he suggested that the voting strength of each country should be based upon its relative economic power. This could be assessed by considering 'the revenue of lands, the exports and entries at the custom houses, the books of rates and the surveys that are in all governments to proportion taxes for the support of them.'

'Going wholly by guess,' as he described it, he came up with the following numbers: Germany twelve; France, ten; Spain ten; Italy 'where it comes to France', eight; England six; and so on down to 'little neighbouring sovereignties, two; the dukedoms of Holstein and Courland, one. If the Turks and Muscovites were taken in, they would have ten seats each.' This compares reasonably with today's population-based proportions, giving Germany most Members of the European Parliament, followed by France, Italy and the United Kingdom.

Next he thought about a meeting place: as central as possible for the first meeting and after that, as agreed. The modest numbers he proposed for his European parliament would have reduced today's tax burden considerably - no multitudes of civil servants working in costly office accommodation.

He stipulated that the assembly room should be round, with many doors, to avoid problems of precedence. Delegates would work in groups of 10; they would take it in turn to choose one of their number to preside over the assembly, collect the sense of the debates and declare the votes. Voting would be by ballot and a three quarters majority required - or at the very least, seven above the balance.

As for a common language, Penn suggested Latin or French. What would he have thought of our present multi-lingual system? In 2001, before the recent expansion, the work of translation and interpreting involved a total of 110 linguistic combinations and occupied one third of Commission staff. This is bound to expand as more states with new and generally unfamiliar languages join the Union.

In the last section of his paper Penn dealt with the possible objections to his proposals. The first was that the strongest and richest state might not agree to a particular decision. His answer to this was that such a state would be no stronger than all the rest combined, especially in view of what he had already defined as a majority vote.

Secondly there was a fear that without armies, youth would become effeminate. That sounds rather strange to twenty-first century ears, but Penn had a solution. This objection, he thought, could be overcome by a good education - 'how to save and help, not injure or destroy.' The education of its youth 'ought of all things to be the care and skill of the government.'

The last objection he foresaw was that 'sovereign princes and states will hereby become not sovereign; a thing they will never endure.' After the dreadful suffering experienced in two world wars, some nation states today are willing to forego their sovereignty, but to other it is too precious a thing to lose. Penn thought the sovereignties would remain as they were, for 'none of them have now any sovereignty over one another: and if this be called a lessening of their power, it must be only because the great fish can no longer eat up the little ones.'

The striking metaphor brings to mind the Common Fisheries Policy, which came into being when the four countries rich in fish were negotiating entry into Europe. Besides ourselves, these were Ireland, Denmark and Norway; the latter eventually opted to stay out of the Union and to manage its own fish stocks. Signing away our fishing rights has hardly produced the hoped for results. Norway, on the other hand, seems to be successful in conserving its fish stocks.

As for loss of sovereignty, Penn did not envisage a comprehensive merging of nation states, such as was gathering momentum until the Dutch and the French people showed it was 'a thing they will never endure.'

We share the same aim as Penn: the basic one of peace between nations. 'What can we desire better than peace,' he asked, 'but the grace to use it?' The grace to use it is surely something to pray for during the pause for reflection.

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