

Another response, universal civil service

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L'Armée de Terre dans la société

An the end, is the UNS the right response to the objectives pursued? Not for General (2S) Hubert BODIN qui advocates for a renewed form of civic service.

Situation on the eve of 22 February 1996

At the end of 1995, the Interministerial Commission on Civil Forms of the National Service drew up a rather satisfactory assessment. The number of conscripts opting for civilian service was increasing and management was greatly improving. The number of conscripts concerned, all taken into account, including protocols and objectors, already exceeded 50,000. In three years, the number of departmental committees for civil service in the N.S. had risen from 30 to 70. These committees, in charge of managing these conscripts and placed under the authority of the departmental prefects, were a very light structure: one or two civil servants, assisted by a few conscripts from the civil service. By strengthening them a little, it was possible to increase them to 100,000. This was at a time when it was planned to draft a new white paper, which would open up the civilian forms of service more widely compared to the military forms, in the German style. This seemed to suit everyone, including armies that wanted to become more professional.

Lhe suspension of national service and its consequences

The announcement of 22 February 1996 by the President of the Republic that conscription had been suspended was in fact a point of no return. The partisans of maintaining compulsory service, despite some fine tirades in the National Assembly, quickly rallied to the minimum formula of the 5-day citizen's meeting, followed by the day of appeal for the preparation of the defence.

It was obvious that the suspension of national service was going to be a measure widely appreciated by the youth and very quickly accepted by all but a few nostalgic people. The armies, for their part, were going to embark fully on the professionalization already begun.

This measure very quickly led to similar decisions in neighbouring countries: Spain, Italy and even, in 2011, Germany.

The only interest of this citizen meeting, which responded to the wishes of many, was to reach out to all young people, but in a "homeopathic" way. This small minimum was only conceivable because the armies still had enough premises and manpower to meet this need. At present, it would no longer be possible and therefore, a fortiori, it would not be possible to return to compulsory military service of any significant duration (3 months minimum).

Universal civilian service

What we have just seen would lead to the only possible solution at a reasonable cost: compulsory civilian service.

In fact, the problem must be reversed. What we want is for young people to "serve" the Nation which, in return, can "serve" them by instilling in them some basis for citizenship and not the other way round. However, this training in citizenship, rigour and respect for institutions should be done well before the age of 18 and, if not, it will not be effective in a month. Moreover, the army is not the only institution that can carry out this training. Moreover, it is not its vocation and if military service had this virtue in its time, it was an appreciable spin-off, certainly, but not at all the purpose of conscription.

On the other hand, in order to offer our young people, between 18 and 20 years of age, the possibility (a little constrained!) to put their skills into practice in the service of the country, it is not too late. Discovering society through the problems of illiteracy, handicap, poverty, environment, rural desertification, suburbs and also the functioning of institutions and the various social and economic problems of the country. Being open to the difficulties of the administration when one is "on the other side of the fence" can only be beneficial.

The experience of civil service, at the time of the obligation, through testimonies collected from young people at the end of their service, showed that young people who were absolutely unmotivated, having chosen civil service to escape the rigours of military service, could be satisfied to have worked for society, either within the army or in the army. The cost of the system was not exaggerated, since the management was done, as it was done in the past, by the Ministry of Education. The system was not overly expensive since it was managed, as we have seen, on the basis of a light structure and in the majority of cases, young people were not housed but went home in the evening. They simply received a meal allowance and a small monthly allowance.

The alternative to the UNS could therefore be compulsory civilian service, which would affect everyone, including the disabled in possible cases, which would be

6 months or a year and would put young people at the "service" of the

country: administration, national education, health, environment, culture, personal assistance, animation of "medical and administrative deserts" ... There is no lack of needs! Two simple examples: the elimination of a large number of civil servants in the civil service could be done smoothly by placing "cheap" conscripts to put oil in the wheels; let us imagine the possibilities offered in the field of homework help at school...

The teaching of citizenship would be done in this way, not in a theoretical way, but through involvement in the field. Not to mention that some people, thus more open to the realities of the country, could find their professional path in this experience.

All of this would be possible by respecting a few principles:

- the posts allocated should not compete with the jobs,
- existing volunteers would be retained or even increased and encouraged, in particular by opening up more to Europe and the world,
- the accommodation of the young person should remain exceptional,
- the transition to employment at the end of the service should be encouraged.

Service would count as one year in the calculation of the pension.

It should be noted that in 2016, the government has taken a number of relevant measures to this end.

For example, a High Commissioner for Civic Engagement, President of the Civic Service Agency, has been established under the Prime Minister.

Its main tasks are to lead and coordinate inter-ministerial action in favour of civic engagement, develop civic service, coordinate the discussion on extending the Defence and Citizenship Day and create and promote a citizens' reserve.

At the same time, an "equality and citizenship" law was passed at the end of 2016, including new measures for the development of civic service in order to further strengthen civic engagement.

All these positive initiatives have contributed to the fact that nearly 130,000 young people have been committed to a mission of general interest since the creation of the civic service in 2010.

If we bear in mind that the objective set by the President of the Republic was to reach half of an age group, i.e. 350,000 young people, by 2018, its achievement would already bring us halfway there.

In spite of these advances, if a universal civil service was not conceivable because, make no mistake about it, its implementation would be a huge undertaking involving almost all the ministries, the one-month service supervised by military personnel would seem neither possible, for the reasons given above, nor effective given its

duration.

This would leave at least three avenues worthy of consideration:

**a passage of the future "elites" of the Nation into the armies,
teacher training in their training curriculum, both on defence and more generally on citizenship,**

an involvement of young people in these proposals, so that we don't decide everything for them!

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