

THE “DELORS COMMISSIONS” AND THEIR TRADE SECRETS

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An expert seminar attended by practitioners and analysts from the Delors Commissions, experts in European governance and researchers whose work has focused on the specific features of the Delors Commissions was held on 8 December 2015 in Brussels. The [seminar](#), organised in conjunction with the Historical archives of the European Union in Florence, made it possible to highlight some of the aspects which made the Delors Commissions so successful in its day and which may prove useful in enlightening today's debates on the functioning of the Commission and on European governance. Pascal Lamy delivered the seminar's keynote speech, which this Tribune is based on.

Good morning to you all,

What a pleasure to be surrounded by friends and colleagues going back so many years, at the very moment when my country is going through such a tough time and when the construction of Europe sometimes looks as though it is teetering! In these stormy times I particularly appreciate the opportunity offered me to stand back and take a look together at our common past in connection with this theme devised by Yves Bertoncini, a theme that stirs people's appetite and sparks their curiosity.

We are talking about trade secrets: skilfully striking the right balance, wisely mingling the ingredients and displaying expert sleight of hand, all things that one cannot reveal without sticking one's neck out, even before such a well-disposed audience.

It is undeniable that such factors as geoeconomic, geopolitical and political circumstances contributed to the Delors Commissions' legendary success.

But those factors still needed to be detected, correctly interpreted, seized at the right moment and used to best advantage, which brings us to the issue of trade secrets.

I will not go into the details of these complex alloys whose composition and mix were constantly changing throughout the ten years of the Delors era. I will confine myself to recalling ten or so of the ingredients, whose individual weight in the mix can be debated another time.

The man, his sense of innovation, the care he put into preparations, the team, his friends, the College, the DGs, the European Parliament, the media and lastly, timing.

1. The Man

I shall kick off with the man, his profile and his history. I have often said that if the European Council had had the excellent idea of tasking a headhunter to recruit a president for the Commission, the best headhunting agency would have come up with Jacques Delors:

Delors probably was the only man in the world tailor-made for this unique job. In his previous lives he had capitalised on all of the qualities required to succeed, and he had those qualities in greater number than anyone else.

His professional life, which at the time was longer than his political life;

His experience as an employee of the Bank of France, with little in the way of high university qualifications but he was put through tough training by a director who had him rework every task a hundred times until it was perfect;

His history as a man of the trade unions, which he considered crucial; especially his experience as a trade-unionist teaching economics, which forced him over a long period of time to develop a way of couching his ideas in simple terms for the benefit of audiences not necessarily expert in the discipline;

The network man, a member of all the clubs which he frequented, and some of which he even created himself, such as "Exchanges and Projects", a feature of his Christian militancy; yet his militancy was devoid of any attempt to convert.

When you write the history of Delors, of the man, of the personality that he is, your mind goes first and foremost to the blessed time that he spent at the Commissariat au Plan, a place where the future was thought out, where the issues of the economy, of growth, of competitiveness and of employment were weighed up, evaluated and analysed with the leading senior civil servants of the French Republic and with representatives of industry and of trade unions. This forum at the time was a kind of economic and social council that around Delors. He felt perfectly at ease with them and was able to put several of the qualities to the test, that he subsequently displayed in the Cabinet of Prime Minister Chaban Delmas and in his role as Minister of the Economy.

When the Left got into power in 1981, Mitterrand needed a reassuring figure to soothe the markets, which could already envisage Russian tanks entering Place de la Concorde. So he appointed Jacques Delors to the post of Minister of the Economy, while taking care to set alongside him some of his closest aides such as Laurent Fabius, in order to keep control. It was in that post that Jacques Delors forged a solid reputation, a strong stature and a renown for excellence for himself, even among our neighbours, through a series of devaluations for which he had fought. Bitter debates took place at the European level, particularly with the Germans, over whether the franc should be devalued or the Deutsche mark revalued. Economists will tell you that it does not make much difference, while politicians will tell you that it makes all the difference.

The European Council's choice of Jacques Delors for President of the European Commission (naturally without their consulting any headhunters) was totally fortuitous. Without going into the details, his appointment to the top post in the Commission in the wake of the European Council at Fontainebleau was the result of chance, of François Mitterrand's tactics, of Lady Thatcher's doubts and of Helmut Kohl's intuition.



2. His Sense of Innovation and Initiative

The second ingredient was his sense of innovation and initiative. He had his career to thank for this creative approach which consisted in persevering with the individual or collective reflection whatever the situation, in order to come up with ideas and to put forward solutions. He had this ability and this permanent need not to manage situations but to change them. Delors was not a man to try resolving a problem whose equation has long been formulated with well-known variables and coefficients. He tirelessly endeavoured to devise a new equation with which to wrestle. He also displayed immense creativity in the manner in which he delivered and stage-managed his innovations and his inventions. Once designated, his first initiative, to everyone's surprise, was to conduct a tour of Europe's capitals in the second semester of 1984. What was the significance of that move? The council members felt that "he was overdoing things a bit". He, for his part, thought that it was the best way of promoting his idea of imparting a fresh thrust to the construction of Europe, which had slowed down a little on account of the laborious absorption of British membership. It was the right time to build a consensus over the priorities that would make it possible to bring together the necessary political energy to fuel that fresh thrust.

To build this consensus, Delors rapidly mobilised his contacts and organised talks with all of the heads of state and government, including those of countries still involved in membership negotiations such as Spain and Portugal, and he took care to ensure that these meetings were known. It soon became clear to everyone that Delors was touring the capitals to discover new ideas, to make proposals and to impart a fresh boost to the dynamic of Europe's construction.

That will drive his action from the very start and right through to the last grand gesture of his last mandate, the White Paper in 1993 on "Growth, Competitiveness and Employment". That trio is still highly topical, concerning as it does three issues that were important then and are absolutely crucial today. When you read the passages on "information superhighways", to use his expression, you cannot help but think of the digital economy well before it became such a fashionable theme. Excellent strategist that he was, Delors was always one step ahead, in fact that was a key element in his personality.

When the Treaty of Luxembourg was being negotiated following the Single Act, the official formulation that he had commissioned from Lord Cockfield for Objective

1992 which he announced in a famous speech that he made to the European Parliament and which he outlined in detail in the White Paper, Delors had attempted to raise the currency issue. He came up against the brick wall of German opposition, but that did not put him off. There is an element in the Treaty of Luxembourg that echoes the debate: "on the Union's monetary capability". He had managed despite everything to insert this small snake into the solid rock of a treaty, so that he could then use it to enable him to take it further. This is a good example of his "mastermind" and of his gift for developing strategies, for organising and for planning in advance. It was sometimes a product of his intuition, for example at the time of Germany's reunification, of which he was the first person I know to have a clear vision. Even the German chancellor - and I can testify to this personally because I attended their talks - did not have such a clear perception of what was in the offing.

Not all of Jacques Delors' initiatives produced results. He had envisaged the creation of a broad economic area to serve as an antechamber for new members, with a view to a rapprochement with the countries of eastern Europe. The idea was later revived by Mitterrand in a far more improvised form - a Confederation - but that was equally unsuccessful. So Jacques Delors had this ability to plan for the longer term, but he also had the ability to react rapidly to events.

At the G-7 meeting in Paris in 1989, he worked with Mulroney, Kohl and Mitterrand to cobble together the measures that needed to be adopted for the Commission to be given a mandate to accompany the transformations in the countries of central and eastern Europe. I took charge of the initiative to allow him to get some sleep. He arranged to obtain the G-7's endorsement in order to encounter fewer difficulties in persuading his somewhat reluctant colleagues on the Commission and the normal institutions, including the European Council. He never tired of taking the initiative.

3. Preparation

The third and now legendary ingredient was preparation. Delors always considered preparation to be the job, a demanding, never-ending job, at weekends, early in the morning or late in the evening, to ensure that he was thoroughly familiar with all the issues. That is Delors' self-taught side.

He lived in constant fear of being unable to sufficiently master aspects, facts, figures and arguments, so he just

kept on storing them in his brain. This concern showed through when he was preparing Commission meetings. As President of the Commission, with Émile Noël at his elbow and me behind him, he was the only one to master the Commission's agenda and all of the issues being debated. The Commissioners generally arrived with their own large file but only really knew about the issues that concerned them directly and so they just sat the rest of the meeting out. Delors, on the other hand, reviewed every single issue on the agenda and all the Cabinet members' briefing notes that went with them.

The same applied to the preparation of European Council meetings, which were absolutely hellish moments where the tension continued to mount as the meeting drew nearer. We invariably had to redraft papers, revise notes or reassess such and such a scenario. We also had to anticipate the reaction of a given player or the objections of another, and be ready to respond. I also recall one Cabinet member, Joly Dixon, who experienced the "hell of Basel" where Delors would travel once a month to convene the governors and to prepare the Delors Report on the EMU. There again, the way it was staged was of paramount importance. Delors was the group's chairman but out of respect for their lofty function, he decided that he would travel to the central bank governors' monthly meeting in Basel rather than have them come to Brussels. Delors went to meet with these ranking dignitaries rather than vice-versa so that he would find it easier to get them to swallow the pills he had prepared for them. That points up the importance of the stage setting, of representation and its symbols.

I could have added an eleventh ingredient regarding his fondness for form. He always took great care with the way he dressed, with the way he looked, when people do not really have much time for modish dressing in the trade-union environment from which he came. Those who know him best know that stage setting and design were one of his missed vocations, which explains the care that he took with even the smallest details of gesture, presentation and representation.

4. The Team

The fourth element was the team, a tailor-made team comprising, devoted, extremely loyal and very hard-working individuals. Every single person who was a member of his team, without exception, was permanently marked by the experience. Some recall it with enthusiasm, while others such as Karl Falkenberg or David White remember it as not being much fun, but

none have ever regretted that founding experience, an experience that did wonders for pushing their careers forward as, almost without exception, they were later to discover.

I had the privilege to recruit all of his aides. I had had the good fortune both to have worked with him previously and to stop working with him later when I joined Prime Minister Pierre Mauroy's Cabinet in 1983. He was not too happy with the fact that Mitterrand moved me like a pawn from the Cabinet of the Deputy Chief of Staff at Rivoli to the post of Deputy Chief of Staff in the Prime Minister's Cabinet. But the minor crisis that the move sparked between us was rapidly overcome. Thus I had built up in-depth familiarity with the man he was, both in private and in public. I knew what he was capable of doing and what he liked doing, but also what he was less capable of doing and what he did not like doing. My role was to help him to do what he did well even better, and to do what he did not like doing in his stead.

Delors might change his mind after a substantial debate with his aides or else he might stick to his guns. For example, he was fairly unreceptive to environmental issues for quite some time, but Geneviève Pons, a fighter of a woman who had taken the precautionary principle very much on board, succeeded in winning him over. For my part, I tried to persuade him for years that his dedication to the poor, small farmer was exaggerated, but I never managed to get him to change his mind. Of course, it also needs to be said that he is from Corrèze and I am from Normandy, and that Michel Jacquot and then Jean-Luc Demarty who were in charge of agricultural issues obeyed the boss, not his deputy! How often he argued with Jean-Michel Baer or with Patrick Venturini about social dialogue or about Erasmus!

His teams were multinational throughout this period. That requirement was one of the conditions that I had set on my departure when I went to Brussels. When I informed the French diplomats in charge of European affairs at the Quai d'Orsay that I had chosen a German as my number two, they eyed me for ever more as though I were a dangerous individual in whose company they did not wish to be seen. Günter Burghardt can testify to that even if he was not aware of it at the time. The small number of French people in Delors' first team triggered an earthquake in Paris, and if Frenchmen later took Günter's place - François Lamoureux, then Jean-Charles Leygues and finally Jean-Pierre Jouyet - it was not on account of their nationality but on account of their intellectual proximity and psychological compatibility

with Delors. I wanted to be able to rely on those affinities and to ensure that my replacement would get on with the "Boss" if I had to leave. The issue only arose very late in the day, when I had become convinced that he was not going to stand in the French presidential election. So I left feeling confident with regard to the quality of his entourage when duty called me back to Paris.

Delors was not always easy to work with, as many of those seated around this table will remember. I even had to play a shock absorber role when he (rarely) allowed himself to let fly at one or other of his aides. But the situation never deteriorated into a drama. We all remember that he was not gentle on himself either.

5. Friends

The fifth important ingredient were his friends. An exhaustive list would be too long but we should mention people like Max Kohnstamm, Etienne Davignon and François-Xavier Ortoli, as well as all his Belgian contacts whom he cultivated on account of his family origin, and his links with the Relève, the left wing of the Belgian Christian Democracy at the time. There were his acquaintances such as Jean Godeaux, Philippe Maystadt and Pierre Defraigne, slightly younger, who was to become my own Chef de Cabinet in 1999, and of course there were the trade unionists, the elders of the CFTC and the CFDT, the Europeans and the northerners, and other Europeans such as Emilio Gabaglio. And there were the industry bosses, the leading businessmen in France, Germany and Italy, whom he had known for a long time. Delors interacted hugely and to great effect with every one of his circles of friends.

He was close to such great politicians as Kohl and Mitterrand, who had forged ties of trust and respect with him. He entertained warm relations with Kohl, whereas his relationship with Mitterrand was a little more lukewarm. He had proved capable of forging ties with such different figures as Ruud Lubbers, Felipe Gonzalez, Giulio Andreotti and many more. He even built up a relationship with Margaret Thatcher. I, who witnessed all of their meetings, can testify to the fact that their working relationship was excellent. I am not referring to the scenes where they had to play cat and dog.

Now here I would add the name of Émile Noël, who played a crucial role, but I would not know what category to class him in. Friend? Aide? It is difficult to say because he was so intelligent and so complex that he moved behind an impenetrable external mask. For Emile Noël,

Commission Presidents and Commissions came and went but he stayed put. He was a central and permanent pillar of the Commission, its chief engineer. He was not slow to grasp the full potential that Delors' arrival on the scene offered him and to realise that here was no run-of-the-mill President; while Delors, for his part, also rapidly understood the full benefits that could reap from the impressive knowledge and awareness of this man with his ironclad tenacity who was devoted heart and mind to European integration. Their meeting was so decisive that I could almost count Émile Noël as a "trade secret" in his own right.

6. The College

The College was also hugely important. Delors devoted a great deal of his time to it, in fact sometimes too much time in my view. The conversations that he held with the Commissioners often had the flavour of a coffee-bar chat. But Delors was always eager to display his amenability towards his Commissioners and we always had to find time in his diary for them whenever they sought to meet with him. This unflagging ability to listen was very much appreciated by his colleagues. It was a time when the Commission was a College and its President, a first among equals, had to build and entertain his legitimacy; and this, not simply by intellectually, technically and politically dominating his colleagues.

He organised Commission seminars which were not always properly prepared by the Commissioners, who considered it very pleasant to spend a few days in the beautiful countryside eating well and drinking well. These meetings were not always very productive but they served to bolster the collegial mood, the team spirit and the leadership that Delors sought. In his view, the collegial aspect was of primary importance. He functioned on the basis of a German-style or Dutch-style system revolving around the principle of a consensus. But he was also capable, once all of the issues had been addressed, of calling a vote if no compromise was forthcoming. This was a working method that was totally alien to his own national culture.



7. The Directors General

Another ingredient were the Directors General, for whom Delors showed the respect due to "experts". He had this blind respect and trust for the Directors General on account of their expertise, their knowledge and their experience. And for the most part the feeling was mutual. He would convene them to listen to them, or occasionally to preach to them. This new way of working played havoc with the habits of the Commissioners, who did not always approve of the direct ties that were being forged between the President and their Directors General, over whom they felt that they had a kind of proprietary right. Delors felt the need from time to time to sound out the individual opinion of these high-ranking functionaries to explore one or the other issue in greater depth, or to validate his choices and his decisions. Certain members of the Cabinet, such as Bernhard Zepter and Jérôme Vignon, were party to these direct contacts.

8. The European Parliament

The eighth ingredient was the European Parliament, which he always treated with the utmost seriousness, even before it acquired the constitutional jurisdiction that it enjoys today. We can see this in the way he prepared his first address to the Parliament in January 1985, using it to make the first announcement of his plan to impart a fresh thrust to the single market and putting a date on it: 1992. In 1985, 1992 was an eternity away.

His moments with and for the Parliament did not always unfold in the best circumstances and did not always produce brilliant results. He occasionally improvised his answers in the belief that the ties he enjoyed with the Parliament allowed him to respond to the parliamentarians' questions without seeking the advice either of Émile Noël or of the experts, including those of Christine Verger and myself. He liked to feel that he was on an equal footing with the parliamentarians. His appearances did not consist simply in taking the floor, delivering his sermon and then turning his back on them. He set great store by fostering genuine interaction with the Parliament's members and they, in turn, always greatly appreciated that fact. The longer-serving members still speak of it with admiration.

9. The Media

That brings me to the last point but one, the media. Delors was and still is a media showman of the first order. He benefited in this from the training and formation that

he acquired in his life as a teacher, managing to illustrate complex issues simply. His didactic sense and his ability to make himself understood without jargon, acronyms or convoluted arguments and to disentangle complex issues, all qualities which had previously served him well in Paris, took Brussels by storm. In that sense he was an artist, an inventor of simplicity. He had the knack of choosing the right moment for his appearances in the media and the journalist with whom he would be speaking. Journalists had detected in him a fair dose of political narcissism, which they cultivated in the hope of picking up a few scoops. Sometimes he would even gratify them with faux-pas or with involuntary lapses that attracted media attention. Journalists absolutely loved it when they could trip Delors or get a howler out of him! To be filed in the gestural category, the stage-managing of the ideas and messages that he wished to get across. In that connection, the various spokespersons for the Commission who worked with him were de facto members of the President's Cabinet.

10. Timing

And finally, there was timing.

Timing is the basic raw material of the job if you are the President of the Commission, the institution that is the master of the palace clocks. It governs the schedule of European integration, it decides when to speed things up and when to slow them down. Managing the timeframe is one of the Commission's great institutional privileges.

Delors revisited the deadlines in his head every single day, whether in the short, medium or longer term. He constantly bore in mind the schedule of his future timing: tomorrow, next week, in six months' time, in five years' time, or in ten years' time. Deadlines for the day after tomorrow were obviously more frequent than those for in five or ten years' time, although they were still part of the same cycle. This ceaseless concern was a source of major inconvenience to the whole of his team, especially to his private secretariat which suffered from the torments of a schedule that was constantly being reshuffled. It was rare too hear him, pencil and eraser in hand, voice his satisfaction with his schedule, with this ephemeral and perpetually unfinished construction. Neither his secretaries nor I ever succeeded in stabilising his ceaseless revision of the sequence of his activities, which he decided on himself down to the smallest detail. This contortionate writhing over his schedule could feel quite burdensome on some days. In fact it was as a reaction to this haphazard way of managing time that I became immune to absurd changes, according to my aides. I understood what should and should not be done. If he had used the time he wasted on his schedule, to reflect, to speak, or to listen, he would have been an even better Commission president. That is my sole regret.

The other ingredients in the Delors Commissions' trade secrets, if there are any, and the lessons to be learnt from an assessment of their respective weight in the overall picture, we may leave to present and future historians.

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