

# THE “DELORS COMMISSIONS”: WHAT CAN BE LEARNED FOR TODAY’S EU?



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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.

Yves Bertoncini and Dieter Schlenker set the ball rolling by pointing out that the seminar was part of a multi-year project on the archives which Jacques Delors himself has donated to the Jacques Delors Institute. The archives in question have been digitalised and processed by the Historical archives of the European Union in Florence, thus all of the partners in the project<sup>1</sup> can now offer their researchers the opportunity to consult those archives in a thematic or chronological fashion in order to shed light on a range of both historical and topical issues. In that connection, this first seminar focused on the way in which Jacques Delors steered the European Commission and envisaged the governance of Europe, in an effort to shed light on the political, institutional and human components that contributed to his Commission’s broadly acknowledged success.

Thanks to an exclusive contribution from Pascal Lamy, the Delors Commissions’ “backbone”, its “soldier monk”, and from many more of that Commissions’ contemporaries, the seminar was able to pinpoint the ingredients which went to make up the “exceptional mix” of the Delors Commissions, while also dwelling on the capabilities of its President, which are what allowed that mix to bear fruit. These testimonies were borne out both by an initial overview of Jacques Delors’ archives conducted by Piers Ludlow and by the analysis proffered by the experts in “Delors governance”.



## 1. The man, his sense of innovation and his preparation

“If the European Council had had the good idea of hiring a head-hunter to appoint the Commission President, the best head-hunter in the world would have come up with Jacques Delors”. That was how Pascal Lamy highlighted the fact that Jacques Delors had managed to build up all of the qualities needed for the job in his “previous lives”. His career as an employee with the Bank of France, as a trade unions man, as a militant Christian and as a department head with the Commissariat au Plan<sup>2</sup> had all allowed him to test his methods and to demonstrate the qualities which he was later to display in his capacity as Minister of the Economy. And yet Jacques Delors found himself being appointed to the post of Commission President by pure chance because the European Council had not in fact hired a head-hunter (despite seriously needing one).

While Jacques Delors may not have owed his appointment to them, his sense of initiative, his pro-active energy and his ability always to “push the envelope as far as possible” were part of the chief qualities which Pascal Lamy and the President’s closest aides feel allowed the Delors Commissions to enjoy their widely

recognised success, as indeed were his personal need not simply to manage situations but to change them, and the tireless search for a consensus which was an absolute priority for him. His "tour of the capitals" perfectly encapsulates that state of mind. He was eager to hear what each player had to say, to dig out the best ideas and to jockey himself into a position where he could make proposals that he could be sure would be accepted. And finally, according to Pascal Lamy, his "self-taught" side and possibly also a certain fear that he never knew enough were what prompted Jacques Delors to prepare his files in meticulous detail, including late at night or at the weekend.

According to Antonio Padoa-Schioppa, it is fascinating to note the extent to which a personality can change the course of events. This, because while all the experts and his erstwhile aides agreed that both the political situation - in particular, the presence of genuine pro-Europeans in the ranks of the heads of state and government of the day - and the institutional context played a considerable role in the Delors Commissions' success, it was those Commissions' President who proved capable of placing his leadership, which Helen Drake branded "unlikely", and his political will at the service of his vision of the construction of Europe. He proved capable of shifting the lines of Europe's institutional architecture in order to give himself the means to accomplish the ambitions that he nurtured for Europe.



Pascal Lamy

## 2. The institutional entourage and environment

First and foremost, Jacques Delors had a team that he could rely on. They knew what he did and did not like to do, and they proved capable of rapidly backing him up in each one of his projects; even the President's management of his agenda kept them constantly on their toes. Jacques Delors was particularly eager

always to respond to the demands of his friends, of the members of the College and of the directors general, which led to changes in his routine schedule and complicated the President's agenda. Bruno Dethomas argued that Pascal Lamy was one of the most effective members of his team and provided valuable support, "yet without ever taking himself for Jacques Delors". François Lamoureux and Emile Noël, the Delors Commission's "finest swordsmen", also proved a great help to Jacques Delors. Indeed Jacques Delors set such great store by Emile Noël's expertise and vision that Noël might even be said to have been an integral part of that formula.

Jacques Delors also devoted a great deal of time and attention to the College, listening carefully to its members, particularly during the Commission's sessions in the country. He considered both his meetings with the commissioners, whatever their degree of preparation and efficacy, and the collegial functioning of his team to be of immense importance. Christine Verger, for her part, stressed that there is no longer any real debating at Commission meetings today, the Commissioners tending simply to read out speaking notes, thus turning the College meeting into a recording studio for decisions already made by the Commissioners, whereas in Jacques Delors' day a fully-fledged debate would take place, allowing the issues on the agenda to be thoroughly explored. He would not hesitate to put a decision to the vote when there was no consensus. In the view of Alfonso Mattera, it is thanks to dialogue and to debate with the College that Jacques Delors succeeded in negotiating the three hundred directives in the White paper.

Jacques Delors also worked very closely with the directors general, something which the commissioners were not always very happy about but which allowed him to validate certain intuitions or information and to gird them about with expert scientific safeguards. According to Eneko Landaburu, Jacques Delors had the ability to get his functionaries to go the extra mile, to involve them in a more comprehensive and political debate by asking them to provide the technocratic expertise required to bolster political initiatives. This legitimisation and mobilisation have since disappeared, fuelling a climate of pessimism and of widespread demobilisation among today's functionaries.

While the Commission President counted the heads of state and government of the era - with Helmut Kohl and François Mitterrand heading the list - as his regular interlocutors and on occasion even as his

friends, and he also made a constant effort to interact with political, social and economic players below the national level, in particular at the regional level. He wished to turn the regions and the local and regional politicians into players, quite apart from the money that came from the European budget. This strategy proved effective with Spain for example, where support for the European Union has not dropped in the same way as it has dropped elsewhere, because in a state which is almost a federation in its own right, politicians at every level have become involved in the construction of Europe.

According to Piers Ludlow, while the archives of the early years (1985-1988) consist basically in public documents and press cuttings which could easily be found elsewhere, the documents regarding the second and third Delors Commissions are "more useful and more substantial". They include, in particular, an impressive series of often very laconic minutes of meetings which Jacques Delors held with players sometimes from outside the Community and with a certain number of national leaders. The files also include documents used to brief Jacques Delors, preparatory files ahead of meetings, documents analysing political positions, a handful of debate summaries, and several very extensive reports on Councils of Ministers or Commissions. Piers Ludlow revealed that they testify to the EU's relations with the world at large, but also to the individual relationships which Jacques Delors entertained with the various players mentioned by his aides. Gunther Burghardt confirmed that Jacques Delors also took a far greater interest in external relations than his post allowed for, thus he attended all of the European Council meetings and all of the Foreign Ministers Councils. In fact, the "Single Act" is so named precisely because it proved possibly to build political cooperation into a European treaty for the very first time.

The archives also testify to important ties with the world of the trade unions and the world of religion. Thus Jean-Pierre Bobichon pointed out that Jacques Delors was the person who invented European Social Dialogue, which allowed him to rally the trade unions to his cause in the establishment of the single market. He also stressed that we have Jacques Delors to thank for the fact that the EU adopted the Charter of Fundamental Social Rights, pointing to his determination to make social affairs one of the Union's intrinsic values.

And lastly, Jacques Delors held the European Parliament in high esteem. Thus long before the investiture of the Commission President demanded a speech to Parliament, Jacques Delors was eager to appear before that body and to debate with the parliamentarians.



Piers Ludlow

### 3. The art of communicating and the sense of listening

Jacques Delors proved capable of being at once a true political leader in the Commission and in the company of heads of state and government, and at the same time availing himself of his deep understanding of communication and of the media.

"Jacques Delors was and indeed still is a first-class media animal". According to Pascal Lamy, he had the right "training" for it, the right career path and the ability to express complex issues in simple terms, a need to educate, to ensure that he was understood without resorting to complicated acronyms and regulations. He loved using, and knew perfectly well how to use, his skills when appearing in the media, occasionally "rewarding" journalists with faux pas or genuine, unscripted slips. Philippe de Schoutheete described Jacques Delors as a magnificent charmer, whether it be in his relations with the press, with the political leaders of his day, or with the members of the administration. Helen Drake, for her part, added that Jacques Delors often hit the headlines in the British tabloid press and that even when it was bad press, it was still a way of ensuring that he got into the media.

Piers Ludlow pointed to the extraordinary collection of documents illustrating media coverage of Jacques Delors in his archives, although he said it is a shame that we do not know either the use Jacques Delors made of them or his reaction to them. In any event, the archives appear to include statements from Jacques Delors' contemporaries testifying to his

media appetite, and they allow us to argue that this was one of the most important aspects of his presidency of the Commission. Alain Dauvergne confirmed that Jacques Delors took a great deal of interest in the media, that he devoured the newspapers (and not just *L'Équipe*) and that he had a deep understanding of the importance of the media system. In fact, he argued that Europe would benefit enormously if the newspapers started to put European issues in their domestic pages, which they do not always do.

Jacques Delors' charm also worked with the administration, whether we are talking about the directors general or about the members of the COREPER. According to Philippe de Schoutheete, President Delors was one of the rare Commission Presidents to cultivate regular ties with the COREPER on both the formal and the informal levels, which allowed him to forge bonds of trust and to ensure that the scales were tipped in his direction.

The success of Jacques Delors' leadership was also based on his sense of dialogue and on his ability to listen. Gunther Burghardt dwelled on the fact that Jacques Delors took great care never to pretend to have the answer to every question, and that he preferred to call himself into question on a permanent basis. This highlights the Commission President's ability to listen, a trait which he used with his aides, with heads of state and government and with political and social players alike. Even when he knew exactly where he wanted to get, he always let others have their say. Yet it was extremely difficult to persuade him to do things which he did not consider to be priorities or for which he did not feel prepared. When that happened, you had to persuade him and to get him to "play ball", as for instance at his first meeting with Ronald Reagan. Convinced that there was no point in going to meet with this President because he reckoned Reagan would not even know who the Commission President was, he did not want the meeting to take place. In the event, not only did Reagan remember that it was Jacques Delors who had accompanied him during a D-Day ceremony, but the two men were even able to hold a memorable conversation on farming ahead of the Uruguay Round. Antonio Padoa-Schioppa stressed, despite everything, that with his ability to listen, Jacques Delors was perfectly able to allow himself to be swayed by good ideas and then to champion them himself.

And finally, humility is one of the primary qualities assigned to Jacques Delors, even though it may appear to be at odds with the success of his leadership. Seeking to be a "first among equals", he proved capable of listening to everyone and of calling himself into question in order to further the European cause. According to Alfonso Mattera, he regularly repeated that it is always necessary to "listen to the anguish of states", not to pontificate, not to preach the word, to keep listening and to stay humble if you want to achieve your goal.



Olivier Costa

#### 4. Political vision and leadership

But above and beyond all the charm and the charisma that Jacques Delors put into his job, it was his atypical leadership that allowed him to achieve his goals. According to Helen Drake, Jacques Delors had his "methods", which were "plain speaking", an educational approach, his self-taught side and his iconoclastic approach, which is why Jacques Delors found himself more at home in Brussels than in Paris, particularly in the context of the fifth Republic. In his *Mémoires*, he states that the constant thread running right through his career was the search to call into question the established order of things, which makes him the engineer of the European construction project. He hoped, in all humility, that History would recall that he instituted methods (such as the White Paper, for instance) for making it possible to achieve goals defined by others.

In the view of Olivier Costa, one of Jacques Delors' biggest successes was that he proved capable of persuading the heads of state and government - without whom nothing could be achieved - to impart a fresh boost to the machinery of Europe. Achieving that required charisma, a political will and many of the qualities listed above, but also legitimate political leadership.



Jacques Delors proved capable of converting the leadership which he enjoyed on an intergovernmental scale at the level of the institutions, of the European Commission, and thus of transcending a certain deficit in legitimacy affecting the institution and its President. Given that he did not enjoy the democratic legitimacy that investiture by the European Parliament brings with it today, he decided to engage in a dialogue with that institution that was designed not only to bring the parliamentarians into the construction process under way, but also to bolster his democratic legitimacy. He also proved capable of imparting legitimacy to the Commission by establishing dialogue with all of the political, economic and social players who had conflicting issues and interests, and he succeeded in building a consensus in connection with numerous topics.

While he benefited from recognition of the usefulness of the Commission's leadership because there was more "desire for Europe" back then than there is today, particularly on the part of certain heads of state and government and of certain national public opinions, he nevertheless had to cope with a critical press and with an increase in the number of claims at the European level as national players, NGOs, trade unions, parties and so forth started to realise that that was the level on which they needed to fight their battles, by bringing pressure to bear on the European institutions. It was also at that time that we began to see the dichotomy between those who thought that the Commission was too pro-active in connection with certain issues, and those who berated it for not doing enough, ironically often in connection with areas over which it often had no authority whatsoever.

Alfonso Mattera pointed out that Jacques Delors held to the political vision of a federation of nation states, in which the Union resembles an "orchestra with twenty-eight different instruments, by comparison with the United States of America which has twenty-eight violinists. They find it easier to play in harmony, but unlike the EU they will never be able to play a symphony. Each member state in the EU must contribute something that the others do not have, something complementary allowing it to raise national sensitivities to a loftier level and to play a symphony". This visionary approach to the European Union made a huge contribution to the Delors Commissions' success, rallying numerous political, economic and social players to their cause.



Helen Drake

## 5. The Delors Commission's legacy

In embracing the governmentalisation of the Commission and the parliamentarisation of the system to the point of institutionalising them in the Maastricht Treaty, Jacques Delors proved capable of proposing a solution to the tension inherent in the Commission between change and stability: the treaties now officially stipulate that the Commission is supposed to stimulate change while at the same time guaranteeing stability and policy management. Completed by internal reforms designed to turn the Commission into a less bureaucratic but more effective institution with greater legitimacy, the treaty laid the groundwork for an institutional architecture that is clearer, but that at this juncture what is now missing is both the desire for Europe and the political will.

As Olivier Costa stressed, with Jacques Delors' departure, it feels as though the European Commission's political parenthesis has closed again, when Jacques Delors' will to turn the Commission into the most important political player in the institutional triangle was clearly a key factor in his commissions' success. While Jean-Claude Juncker seems to wish to restore the Commission's political scope and stature, it feels as though he is still hunting around for Jacques Delors' rudder, numerous aspects of which were mentioned in the course of this seminar. But then, certain institutional developments point to the will to give the European Commission President today, through the use of institutional expedients, the leadership that Jacques Delors succeeded in creating, in building for himself, without any institutional artifice to help him: the President defines the Commission's general policy, he can sack commissioners, and he can institute a system of clusters with vice-presidents, thus circumscribing the number of the President's interlocutors and thus strengthening his capacity for management.

In the view of Antonio Padoa-Schioppa, in order to respond to the two basic aspects of the current crisis, namely the economic crisis and the "security crisis", intergovernmental meetings are essential but they are not enough, and it is absolutely necessary for the EU to base its action on closer cooperation between the Commission and its President and the European Parliament, as outlined, for instance, in the Bresso and Verhofstadt draft bills.

Piers Ludlow highlighted several gaps in Jacques Delors' personal archives, particularly the absence of any letters, when in fact he must have received a great deal of correspondence though his archives contain only about a hundred letters. It would also be interesting to find out where the reports on people and on political situations have gone, given that we are told that he both wrote and read many such reports. The absence of this correspondence and of these reports makes it more difficult to fathom all of the things that made the Delors Commission tick and to shed light on certain aspects of the past, but above all, they would be helpful to allow us to learn lessons with regard to

today's Commissions and to the future of this institution and of its President. Certain archives belong to the Commission and so they will gradually be placed in the public domain in accordance with the "thirty-year rule" which dictates that the Commission's public documents be made accessible thirty years after they were first drafted, while others will come to complete them from the collections of friends and aides, or even from Jacques Delors himself.

It may well be that it proves impossible to lift the veil of mystery surrounding certain issues, and that it proves necessary to continue using testimonies and our own analysis of European governance in order to draw beneficial lessons from the success of the Delors Commissions, with a view to improving both the way the Commission is chaired and the way Europe is government. But everyone agreed that the thing most sorely lacking today is what Alfonso Mattera called "Jacques Delors' European dream", that vision that spawned "genius and creativity" and made it possible to overcome all obstacles.

1. The partners taking part in the project so far are the Historical Archives of the European Union, the Fondation Jean Monnet, the College of Europe (Bruges and Natolin), the Centre d'histoire de Sciences Po Paris and the Jacques Delors Institut – Berlin.
2. A French institution tasked with defining the country's economic planning, which existed from 1946 until 2006 "where people debated on the future, on growth, on competitiveness and on employment with people of immense quality, representatives of civil society, business and industry, employees and so forth, etc." (Pascal Lamy).

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Pascal Lamy, *Tribune*, Jacques Delors Institute, February 2016

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*Videos*, Jacques Delors Institute, 2015/2016

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David Koczij, *Synthesis of the conference organised with Friends of Europe*, Jacques Delors Institute/Friends of Europe, April 2015

REFORMING EUROPE'S GOVERNANCE. FOR A MORE LEGITIMATE AND EFFECTIVE FEDERATION OF NATION STATES

Yves Bertoncini and António Vitorino, *Studies & Reports No. 105*, Jacques Delors Institute, September 2014

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Yves Bertoncini, *Book synthesis*, Jacques Delors Institute, April 2012

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