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#JACQUES DELORS

# EUROPE ACCORDING TO JACQUES DELORS



*While the EU-28 are choosing a new President of the European Commission and are on the brink of a new parliamentary term, we look back on what is still viewed as the golden age of European construction. Going beyond the achievements with outcomes that remain open to criticism, the Delors years form a valuable heritage in terms of the conception of Europe, working methods and political style.*

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This text derives from a conference given by Pascal Lamy, President emeritus of the Jacques Delors Institute, on 28 January 2019 at Bois-Seigneur-Isaac (Belgium) upon the invitation of Bernard Snoy.

With his “Laudator temporis acti”, Horace referred to the age which advances the temptation for a morose censorship of the present period and a glorification of past times. Centuries later, Boileau depicted a grumpy old man who “past times extols, the present to debase”. This is the risk we take when discussing the Delors period (1985-1995)<sup>1</sup> described as a golden age of European construction in comparison to the present day.

Thatcher’s relentless request for a rebate on the country’s budgetary contribution. The circumstances were also made favourable by the fact that staunchly European leaders were in power at the same time, which was like an alignment of national stars over Brussels. France’s president was Mitterrand, who was always committed to Europe, while Helmut Kohl governed in Bonn and Felipe Gonzalez in Madrid. Margaret Thatcher can be included in this list, as she was supportive of Jacques Delors for a long period before making him an adversary.

## 1 ■ Favourable circumstances

To protect ourselves from this risk, we must first of all acknowledge that this period enjoyed favourable circumstances<sup>2</sup>, which contrast with those experienced today. At the time when Jacques Delors took the helm of the European Commission in 1985, the European Summit held earlier in Fontainebleau had put an end to several years of the laborious acceptance of the United Kingdom’s membership in the European Community, punctuated in particular by Margaret

Jacques Delors’ very appointment as President of the European Commission was possible thanks to these happy circumstances. François Mitterrand wanted a French citizen to preside the Community’s future executive body, and had Claude Cheysson in mind. Cheysson was then blocked by a British veto. Helmut Kohl, who had had the opportunity to get to know Delors in his capacity as minister, helped the French President by suggesting Delors, who was ultimately selected in an impromptu manner.

1. Read also “The European Commission, History and Memories of an institution (1986-2000)”, Publications Office of the European Union, vol. 3, June 2019

2. Pascal Lamy, “The Delors Commissions and their trade secrets”, Tribune, Jacques Delors Institute, 10 February 2016

Yet a good headhunter entrusted with finding the right candidate would most likely have ended up advising on the same person. Jacques Delors' personal credentials were very well suited. His professional experience at the Banque de France, his specialisation in economics, which he taught, his trade union experience, his time at the French Plan Commission, then as an advisor to Prime Minister Jacques Chaban-Delmas, his experience as an MEP, elected in 1979, and lastly as French Minister of the Economy and Finance all prepared him for this role at the presidency of the Commission, a position which is both highly technical and political.

Other factors that contributed to developing a favourable context for the European project in the mid-1980s were the negotiations to enlarge the Community to Spain and Portugal, which were enthusiastic candidate countries. The quality of the European commissioners that governments sent to Brussels also helped to create a promising climate, with reliable characters including established figures such as Lorenzo Natali and younger figures such as the Irish Peter Sutherland. Jacques Delors also benefited from the complicity he was able to foster with the eminent Secretary-General of the Commission at the time, Émile Noël. We must also remember the contribution of leading Belgian figures in his entourage, such as Étienne Davignon, Pierre Defraigne, Jean Durieux, the late Philippe Maystadt, Jean-Louis Lacroix and Jean Godeaux. They formed the social wing of the Belgian Christian Democrats.

## 2 ■ The three threads of Delors' conception of Europe

Compared to the evil geniuses at work in Europe today, the Delors period had its share of good fairies. Yet going beyond the happy conjunction of all these separate circumstances, its action was based primarily on a well-defined "Delorean" vision of Europe. It was the backbone of his ten years at the Commission. Jacques Delors believes that

ideas must drive the world. The sources of his conception of a project for a united Europe are threefold: historical, political and institutional. He combined these threads to weave the framework of his European action, which always fed into his thoughts in return and the two ultimately became indistinguishable.

In terms of his thoughts on the historical aspect, Jacques Delors summed this up, in particular in his Memoires, by his famous statement: "survival or decline". This approach, which is not without pessimism, stems from the fact that he belongs to the generation which experienced World War II. His father was seriously injured during World War I. These two conflicts have always influenced his vision of Europe, concerned that the values of the continent to which he was attached, and which expressed in his opinion Emmanuel Mounier's personalism, still had a place in the future. In short, Delors believed that we had to build Europe and its values for civilisation to survive, and that, if we failed, they could be condemned by history.

Delors did not have an Atlanticist view of Europe. His cautious attitude with regard to the USA was less in the French tradition to be willingly critical of Washington, and more about a deep questioning of whether the Americans took the European project and its originality seriously. After each of his meetings with a US President, he hoped that he had conveyed the idea that Europe really did exist. His attitude was akin to a conception of Europe that could nowadays be qualified as geopolitical. It is based on the affirmation of a European identity, the affirmation and very survival of which required a union of Europeans.

His conception of the European project can also be appreciated in its political dimension. Jacques Delors placed "his" Europe at the confluence between European social democracy and Christian democracy, which structured post-war politics in Western Europe. What may appear a conventional position was in fact a unique stance for a politician from France, which did not have any

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real social democrats or Christian democrats as they did in Germany, Italy or Belgium.

His conception of the economy, of social affairs and of politics were in line with the most central parties of the two dominant currents. With them, he always believed that social policy could not be conducted without economic growth and that growth which is unbalanced from a social perspective is not sustainable. Policy requires a certain degree of planning and regulation in addition to social dialogue between responsible social partners. He recognised market efficiency but also saw the need to review the markets. It was with this in mind that he stimulated the Schumpeterian undertaking of liberalisation that is the Internal Market, convinced that increased competition on a European level would enable companies to make productivity gains, and therefore generate greater growth, but understood that this approach must be supported by a policy of social dialogue. He therefore invited European employers and trade unions to Val-Duchesse in Brussels. Another support policy was that of structural funds which offset the effects of opening up to competition, assisting in particular Southern European countries to equip themselves with the necessary infrastructure and skills. In short, Jacques Delors took right-leaning measures for competition and left-leaning measures for social and territorial cohesion.

Later on, in the early 1990s, he added an environmental dimension to these key conditions for sustainable growth. While his rural origins in Corrèze made him initially distrustful of the environmental movement, the Chernobyl disaster in 1986 and his participation at the Rio Earth Summit in 1992 convinced him, well before many political leaders of his time, of the need to accompany growth with environmental protection measures with the same importance as social and territorial cohesion measures.

For Europe, his conception is institutional. This can be summed up in his expression "Federation of Nation-States". For constitutionalists, this is an oxymoron which presents a problem specific to Europe more than a solution for it. The concept is actually close to Habermas, who preferred

the term "Staatenbund" to "Bundesstaat". For Jacques Delors, the juxtaposition of these two conflicting notions, federation and nation-state, provided the solution to the project for a united Europe. It reflects his own position, borrowing equally from Spinelli's federalism and De Gaulle's nationalism. He believes that the union of Europeans is made by both peoples and States. In his political role, he paid as much attention to heads of State and government as to the European Parliament. He was the first President of the Commission to really treat this Parliament as a serious and mature counterpart. Similarly, in his institutional practice, he always placed himself in a triangle connecting the Council, known to be almost like a Senate of Member States, the Parliament, recognised as the expression of the people, and the Commission, which he took care not to identify publicly as a European government, which, had he done so, would have earned him the admonishments of national governments.

He refrained from theorising or elucidating this conception of institutions but had to bear seeing it dented on several occasions. In particular during the talks for the Maastricht Treaty in 1991, during which the traditionally sovereigntist approaches of French and British diplomacy dictated, with the complicity of the Netherlands in particular, that alongside the Community Method, in which the Commission enjoys the monopoly of initiative to express the European general interest, new competencies operate according to a more inter-governmental method that Jacques Delors deemed less efficient. His institutional conception remains strongly attached to the Community Method, the only method he believes really works.

It is through the prism of these three historical, political and institutional dimensions, considered together, that he saw European integration, which he believed to be an absolute necessity for reasons that were ultimately ethical and political in equal measure. Yet this conception is meaningless if it is not embodied in political action. This is where the "Delors method" shone.

### 3 ■ The Delors method and style

Taking the risk of summing the method up excessively, it can be described as a carefully planned and sequenced itinerary, in which each step triggers the next. Minor adjustments are made where necessary, which implies constant attention paid to every factor in the environment which may disrupt or be detrimental to following the course plotted correctly. In short, the method outlines the path to follow and adds radars as milestones. These radars flag up all obstacles or avatars which, if they were neglected, could lead to taking a wrong turning and would have required a great swerve to stay on track. The Delors method is quite scientific in this respect.

It was applied to achieve the Internal Market. The aim of the itinerary, set as early as 1985, was to succeed, in 1992, in removing borders - an idea which was more popular at the time that it would be today. This aim involved a harmonisation or mutual acknowledgement of standards and regulations, for which the differences between countries had up to then justified border controls. As explained above, this process of opening up had to be assisted by structural funds, which were going to result in a major increase in the resources of the Community budget. The Single Act of 1986 dealt with all this.

Following this itinerary, the Internal Market called on the Economic and Monetary Union to put a stop to national devaluations distorting competition. Jacques Delors achieved this later with Maastricht. Upon his departure from the Commission, he left the "White Paper" which outlined a new itinerary for the coming years, which (even then!) predicted the need to equip the European Union with digital infrastructure, something he called "information highways".

This shows that his conception came with a method of action. Yet a third element, the "Delors style", must be added. Jacques Delors' style included his great ability of sharing his vision and his convictions with decision-makers and public opinion. He knew how to surround his projects with a narrative he created with the utmost care.

He had learned previously when teaching economics to his fellow trade unionists to make abstract concepts accessible and to simplify complicated mechanisms. This is why people still say "in Delors' time, we understood Europe".

Remembering this conception, this method and this style applied to promote European integration also involves taking stock of them, almost thirty years on. Jacques Delors moved Europe's unity forward in many fields, with the exception of defence and security. He has always wisely considered that the itinerary for these two fields would be much longer than that applied for the market and the currency. The latter conform more to rational approaches, while the idea of a "European army" also has an emotional dimension and requires Europeans to share the same dreams and the same nightmares.

### 4 ■ Vulnerabilities and weaknesses

The aim here is not to list all the benefits the Delors years brought to Europe. These are already known. It is more useful to attempt to discern any weaknesses "inside the House that Jacques built", according to the title of an essay by British researcher Charles Grant (1994).

The main political weakness is that the Delors house's foundation is the subtle balance between Christian democrats and social democrats. Its model is historically dependent on this. This implies that these two forces must remain dominant and of comparable weighting. This was the case within the European Parliament for a long time. Once this balance was disrupted, the balance between the economic, social and environmental components was also upset. Market efficiency was then increased, without greater regulation and with less pressure to mitigate the social repercussions. Much of this "neoliberal" Europe was not Delors' vision.

Delors' house also has a weakness, namely that Europe is insufficiently constituted against the growing forces of globalisation. When faced with a shock, as was witnessed

during the 2008 financial crisis, the framework of European regulations was not yet sufficiently robust. The Union was not resilient enough. Jacques Delors had identified this weakness from the outset with regard to the Economic and Monetary Union at the time of the Maastricht treaty. He told European leaders that out of his proposals, they had selected a Union that was ultimately very monetary and insufficiently economic. Europe was given greater maturity in some areas of regulation but not in others. These different speeds almost led to the collapse of the euro during the recent crisis. Jacques Delors shared a post-Westphalian vision with Jean Monnet, and with most other people at the time. This vision was unfortunately premature, as Marcel Gauchet said in an interview published recently by Normale Sup: “The EU has absorbed itself in an internal process while the European peoples, against this backdrop of globalisation, were very logically asking for a response to external pressure”.

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More fundamentally, we lacked perspective at the time, in taking the gamble, with the founding fathers, that economic integration would automatically result in political integration. According to medieval alchemy, economic lead should have been converted into political gold. It was believed that between the European consumer, worker and producer and the political citizen, there was necessarily a continuum and yet the species barrier cannot be crossed with impunity. The historian Elie Barnavi presented a good analysis of this in his essay *L'Europe frigide* (frigid Europe) in 2008. Being a citizen implies belonging to a community, to accept to make a collective effort, where workers and consumers think in terms of supply and demand in a sphere which remains economic and rational. The “democratic deficit” often criticised on a European level is not about the *kratos*, i.e. the Union’s institutional structures, but about the *demos*. There is, rather, a deficit in belonging. This deficit exists on other levels but not, or hardly, on a European scale. Europe often appears clear to non-Europeans but remains vague to Europeans.

Jacques Delors did, however, have some intuition of this intrinsic cultural deficit in the European project. He therefore created the “*carrefours de la culture*”, which brought together intellectuals, social science researchers and artists. Today, in a far-reaching bid to correct this deficit, we must begin by studying contemporary European anthropology, as do all the new university chairs created for this purpose, the first of which was at the Catholic University of Leuven, with the support of the Jacques Delors Institutes in Paris and Berlin. They explore the differences between Europeans to gain a better understanding of their identity behind everything that obstructs it in their respective representations. One example is the way in which history is taught to young people, because as children we take on a number of narratives and images.

## 5 ■ A Europe which has become more necessary and more difficult

This painstaking work is worth it because European integration is more necessary today than in the Delors period, but is also more difficult. It is necessary for external reasons: faced with the world around us, the rivalry between China and the USA, with Russia and the Middle East, we need a united Europe. This global context takes us back to the dilemma of “survival or decline”. A strong and stable Europe is also necessary because it alone can guarantee the protection of our European identity, in that it is an identity based on values. In this respect, Presidents Trump, Putin and Xi Jinping are, paradoxically, helping us to measure this need for Europe to provide a balance between economic and social policy in a world that is and will remain globalised. Even more clearly now than twenty years ago, between American hypercapitalism and Chinese hypercollectivism, the European model must remain available. Faced with this need, Brexit is bad news. It is taking away from European construction, and from European civilisation, a major country and is making Europe less strong against the rest of the world.

Integration is, however, more difficult because while the challenge today is to protect values, these very values can be unsettled within Europe. They have been seriously affected in Hungary and Poland. The foundation itself may be affected by the erosion of these democratic values. Therein lies a short-term battle on what European necessity involves. We must hope that after the European elections, the Heads of state and government and the European Parliament will appoint as President of the Commission a figure who is able to meet these challenges which are even more formidable than those that Jacques Delors had to face. Let us wish this person the same capacity to inspire, and expertise that is as extensive!

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