

THE DELORS LEGACY: LESSONS FOR THE FUTURE

JIM CLOOS
TEPSA

EDITORIAL



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When I started jotting down notes for writing this editorial, I soon realised that I was just paraphrasing [Pascal Lamy's remarkable essay on Jacques Delors](#). I thought of looking for another theme, but then decided to pursue, because Delors' legacy is so important. I invite the reader to take this as a simple comment on Lamy's piece, and read the latter first.

Lamy begins by reminding us of Horace's warning against glorifying times past to justify a gloomy condemnation of the present (*"laudator temporis acti"*). Delors did benefit from extraordinarily favourable circumstances at the time, but this in no way diminishes his achievements. Delors was the right man in the right place and at the right time. Consider the following: had Churchill's career stopped in 1938, he would have been remembered as a brilliant, but failed, politician. History often results from the intersection of an opportunity and/or challenge with a strong personality.

There is always an element of chance with political appointments. This is not a scientific process with head-hunters searching for the right person with an extensive list of requirements. A journalist recently asked me what qualities were required to become President of the European Council. "Wrong question", I answered, "that is not the way things work out in practice." In this case, the choice is limited, because it is inconceivable to nominate a person who is not or was not recently a member of the "club." Then there are a range of other considerations further reducing the number of options: availability, political affiliation, gender, geography, and personality. Both Van Rompuy and Tusk were,

each in his own way, well equipped for the crises they encountered. This was a matter of luck for the EU rather than careful planning. No one knew beforehand that the subprime crisis would dominate Van Rompuy's mandate, nor that migration and Brexit would dominate Tusk's. When Delors became Commission President, Lamy recalls, he was not the first choice, but he certainly was the ideal one to make the best use of the opportunities the situation offered.

It helps when the incumbent understands the system in which he or she functions. Lamy rightly points to the multiple actors in the EU. People sometimes think that Delors "ran" the EU (or Community). No one personality (or institution for that matter) "runs" the EU. It is a very original construction built on the principle of checks and balances. There are Presidents of institutions, but there is no President of the EU, and people should avoid behaving as if there was one. Delors himself used the concept of a "Federation of National States" to describe a mix that is neither Spinelli's federalist state, nor de Gaulle's sovereign state, but a mixture of the two. I prefer the term 'Union of States and Peoples' to say the same thing. Pretending that the EU is like a state, or that the Commission is the 'European government' (Delors never did!), or that the EP is the only source of legitimacy within the EU only muddies the waters and create misguided expectations.

It flows from the above that the President of the Commission can only function if he or she works closely with the other institutions and the Member States. This particularly applies to the European Council, which decides on the overall political direction of the EU (and

Note from the author: I was fortunate in my career to have seen President Delors from close-up. In 1985 I joined the Cabinet of Commissioner Mosar (Energy) in the first Delors Commission. In 1993 and 1994 I was Head of Cabinet of Commissioner Steichen (Agriculture) in the last Delors Commission. In between, while working for the Luxembourg Permanent Representation, I closely followed the work of the Delors Commission, particularly in the run-up to the Luxembourg Presidency of the first half of 1991 and the negotiations on the Maastricht Treaty.

quite a bit more, really!). Delors was a master in using the European Council, feeding it with ideas but above all providing blueprints on how to implement the objectives collectively agreed upon by the leaders. We were always waiting for the moment when Kohl, at the end of a political discussion, would turn to the President of the Commission and say *"Now, Jacques, please tell us how to do this?"*. Inevitably, Delors, whose excellent team had anticipated the demand, would explain in simple terms a way of action. He was less the architect of Europe than its master craftsman. Delors had an unmatched capacity for explaining his ideas in simple and understandable terms. This is why he became popular even outside of the Brussels bubble. It is a lesson for today's leaders and those who draft European Council conclusions.

Effective policymaking requires that changing circumstances be used to further European integration. Delors was particularly good at this. The idea of an Economic and Monetary Union had arisen more than two decades before the Maastricht Treaty, when the Luxembourg Prime Minister Pierre Werner drew up an extremely ambitious blueprint on a single currency. It failed because the circumstances were not right. This changed dramatically when the Community embarked in 1985/6 on the creation of the Single European Market. Delors jumped on the opportunity, got himself nominated as the head of an expert group composed of the central bankers, and then elaborated a draft treaty text based on the outcome. The rest is history.

I only really remember one example when Delors and his team misread the intentions of the Member States and failed to understand that the times were not right for what they had in mind. This was also at the time of the negotiations for the Maastricht Treaty (its political part) when the Commission tried to counter the addition to the treaties of an

intergovernmental pillar on foreign policy, security and defence, arguing instead for a 'community approach'. The time was simply not right for a federal move in this area. The question was not a binary between an intergovernmental or a community-based foreign policy, it was a choice between the former or having nothing. In fact, this is still the case today. But who knows what the EU will do if Trump wins the US presidential election and calls into question NATO and the support to Ukraine. As we have seen over the past 15 years, the EU can live up to new challenges and change tack quite dramatically when it has its back against the wall. The European Defence Community project of the 1950s, which failed in 1954 after the refusal of the French Assembly to ratify the EDC treaty, may well one day come back in some form or other, as did the Monetary Union.

Even without Trump, today's challenges are mounting in a hostile world. The EU has no choice but to enhance what some call its strategic autonomy or, to put it more simply, its resilience and capacity to act. After Brexit and Trump in 2016, the EUCO's language and thinking started changing in this respect. It is now vital to transform language and intentions into a systematic and structured policy plan covering all major areas. The June EUCO will adopt a new Strategic Agenda for the years 2024-29. It is to be hoped that it will be ambitious and above all that it will ensure concrete and systematic follow-up by tasking the institutions and the Member States to work out a programme of reforms and measures. (TEPSA has compiled a set of recommendations that can be consulted on [TEPSA's website](#)). The incoming Presidents of the EUCO and the Commission could do worse than taking a page out of Delors's book. They can also take inspiration from efficient way the COVID crisis was jointly managed by the EUCO and the Von der Leyen Commission, as I describe it in [a paper for the Egmont Institute](#) published last year.

This brings me to my last point: the need, together with top-down political guidance, for a method. Delors, like Jean Monnet, attached significant importance to this. Both were obsessed with combining their thinking and ambitions with concrete action. As Lamy writes, Delors and his team would map out *"a path to follow and equip it with radars which warned of any obstacles or unforeseen events which, if ignored, could lead to wrong turns or veering off course. In this respect, the Delors method was quite scientific"*. Today, the circumstances are more challenging than ever, and the risks bigger, both inside and outside of the EU. I still remember Helmut Kohl at the time warning about the weakening of the old traditional structures (churches, trade unions, and 'Volksparteien') that had buttressed European societies after the Second World War; they are all in crisis today and struggle to serve as a protective

shield. Leadership is in big demand, with a keen eye not only for the 'WHAT' but also the 'HOW'; and maybe a bit of Jacques Delors's 'pessimism of reason' as evidenced in his motto about *"survival or defeat"*. Our politicians should heed his conviction that a liberal trade policy must go together with strong social and cohesion policies; here, the Reagan and Thatcher rhetoric against regulation and a strong state has led to excesses and growing inequalities that poison our societies.

While taking inspiration from former statemen like Delors, today's leaders and citizens will have to invent their own European Union, adapted to the requirements of our times. To quote Goethe: *"Was Du ererbt von Deinen Vätern, erwirb es, um es zu besitzen."*

[1] "What you inherited from your forefathers, acquire it, to own it."

All the opinions expressed in this publication are the sole view of the author, and do not represent the position of the Trans European Policy Studies Association (TEPSA) or of its Members.

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Jim Cloos is a high-ranking European official of longstanding esteem. Having taken on a key role in drafting the Maastricht Treaty during the Luxembourgish Presidency of the Council of the European Union in 1991, Mr. Cloos has an intricate expertise on EU Affairs and the internal functioning of the European institutions. In the 1990s he served at the European Commission, first as Head of the Cabinet of the Commissioner for Agriculture, and subsequently as Head of Cabinet to the President of the European Commission and his G7/8 Sherpa. Mr. Cloos has been a close collaborator of High Representative Javier Solana in shaping the EU's Common Foreign and Security Policy. For many years he played a key role in preparing European Council meetings. Before his election as TEPSA Secretary-General, he served as Deputy Director General for General and Institutional Policy at the General Secretariat of the Council of the European Union.

