

Jacques Delors

By 1986, when this volume begins, the Delors Commission was only a year old, but already it had identified its initial targets — the establishment of a single market by 1992 and a push to reform the institutional system in order to reach this goal — and had taken substantial strides towards achieving them. The early course had thus been agreed to by Member States, and a crucial institutional reform in the shape of the Single European Act had been negotiated before that first year was out. Also well under way was a highly beneficial transformation in the Commission's morale from gloom and despondency to exhilarating optimism, and a virtuous cycle of improving relations and successful outcomes in the interaction between the European Commission and other European Community institutions, notably the Parliament and the European Council.



Jacques Delors was President of the European Commission from 1985 to 1995. Over those 10 years he used his leadership and good relations with Heads of State or Government to give a real boost to European integration.

What this profile of Delors from 1986 onwards needs to do, therefore, is to explain how this initial surge forward evolved over time, how the front of Community advance broadened considerably and how its own internal dynamic of change became caught up with the broader transformation of Europe's political position in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Then it must also briefly capture the manner in which this period of rapid forward progress slowed from about 1992 onwards. This meant that while Delors's later years in Brussels were not devoid of achievement, they were much less productive in the sense of launching big new initiatives than the initial period had been.

As many of the other chapters in this volume make clear, the great strength of the internal market project as an instrument for transforming Europe was that the apparently simple notion of removing barriers to the continent's internal trade had implications that extended far beyond commercial policy. The 1992 project thus rapidly ceased to be just about facilitating cross-border business within the European Community and instead became a catalyst for much more extensive change encompassing Europe's wider economy, its approach to borders and domestic security, and its position in the world. And one of Delors's great strengths was his ability quickly to perceive these potential knock-on effects and to position himself and the institution he ran fully to exploit them. Five key examples illustrate this phenomenon, although the final two serve as reminders that, even at the apogee of his power, Delors was constrained by deeply entrenched Member State preferences.

The first instance is monetary union. The connections between the push for a working internal market and the renewed quest for a single currency are explored in detail elsewhere in this volume. What matters in the context of a character sketch of Delors is the manner in which the Commission presidency seized upon the opportunities available and used them to secure for itself a key position in the debate about economic and monetary union. Delors's expertise on the subject and commitment to the idea of monetary union was thus sufficient for his fellow members of the European Council to decide that he should be asked to chair the expert committee established in 1988 to investigate the subject. Once the work of what became known as the Delors Committee got under way, furthermore, he was able to hold his own among its members, helping to steer the final report in a congenial direction. And when the initiative reverted to Europe's Heads of State or Government themselves, he was at home enough in the shifting power dynamics of the European Council to contribute significantly to rapid progress towards his goal⁽¹⁾. There were many architects behind the building of the euro, but Delors had done more than enough to justify a prominent place among them.

⁽¹⁾ Interview with Anthony Teasdale, 11 April 2017.



In 1988 Jacques Delors paid tribute to Jean Monnet in the preface to the work by Pascal Fontaine (*Jean Monnet, l'inspireur*), describing him as a man who knew how to 'deal with the world as it was, including any external constraints' and a 'visionary, with a clear view of the world to come, anxious to prepare for the inevitable, planning for the Europe of tomorrow'. In many regards this description could also apply to Jacques Delors's time as President of the Commission.



Jacques Delors was also a football fan, according to the *Courrier du personnel* in 1989.

The second theme was institutional change, to which cause the Commission President showed similar commitment. Here too his determination was apparent from his very arrival in Brussels, with Delors playing a crucial role in the shaping of the Single European Act. But he was not content with this early success and did not allow himself to be distracted by the very real tasks of implementing this first round of treaty change and exploiting the policy opportunities it opened up, pressing instead for further institutional progress. The budgetary changes proposed in 1987 and approved the following year were in themselves an institutional revolution, even though they stopped short of actual treaty change ⁽¹⁾. But, in parallel, Delors went on making the case for additional treaty reform, notably the extension of majority voting and increased powers for the European Parliament ⁽²⁾. In so doing he helped sustain a powerful constituency in favour of the expansion of European Community powers, thereby creating the conditions in which a further big push in this direction could occur during the early 1990s.

The third thread running through Delors's lengthy term is his struggle to ensure that the quest to create a single market, from which the wealthier Member States in northern Europe were likely to benefit disproportionately, was accompanied by a substantial increase in the redistributive aspect of European integration. If sufficient money could be channelled — initially through the increased Structural Funds agreed to as part of the Delors I budgetary package ⁽³⁾, then through the Cohesion Funds agreed to as part of the Maastricht Treaty — towards the less wealthy parts of the European Community/Union a much more level playing field could be created, and the intra-European income and prosperity gaps could begin to be closed ⁽⁴⁾. On this issue the Commission President was able to make common cause with several of the newer Member States — Greece, Spain and Portugal all had strong interests in seeing a more substantial flow of funds towards the poorer regions of the Community — and to benefit from the willingness of Chancellor Helmut Kohl's Germany to shoulder a significant portion of the extra costs.

A fourth example of Delors's opportunism and determination is apparent in his push for the European Community in general, and the European Commission in particular, to become foreign policy players of note. Like economic and monetary union and institutional change, the ambition itself was not particularly original, but something he shared with most Commission Presidents stretching back to Walter Hallstein. The combination of the European Community's internal success, which in itself guaranteed international interest in what the Brussels

⁽¹⁾ Interestingly Delors contemplated trying to enshrine the alteration of the budgetary procedure in treaty change, but was persuaded, notably by Henning Christophersen, that as much could be accomplished through an interinstitutional agreement: HAEC, COM(87), Minutes No 862, meeting of 15 February 1987.

⁽²⁾ Many of his speeches to the European Parliament were particularly forceful in this respect, although the same basic point was reiterated to many other audiences.

⁽³⁾ See Chapter 9 'The budgetary revolution: from near-bankruptcy to stability'.

⁽⁴⁾ Interview with Pascal Lamy, 7 July 2016.

institutions did and said, and a favourable geopolitical constellation, however, allowed Delors to make much more of a mark in this field than any of his predecessors. Ultimately, it is true that Delors would fall some way short of the level of foreign policy influence to which he seemed to aspire in the late 1980s and early 1990s. But, as the succession of high-level visitors trooping through his office during the early 1990s demonstrates, he was able to make his voice one that mattered in the discussions about Europe's future shape and architecture in the post-Cold War world, as well as contributing to other international debates, such as that about the Middle East ⁽¹⁾.

A fifth constant theme of Delors's energies as he sought to exploit the huge internal dynamism built up by the European Community during the late 1980s was his drive to ensure that the Europe open for business that was being built as part of the 1992 project was also a Europe with a strong social dimension. Here, as with foreign policy, his success was patchy, many of his aspirations colliding with the rather different priorities of several of western Europe's governments. But the extent to which he succeeded in persuading a generation of European trade unionists that the Community/Union could be a progressive force acting in the interests of workers as well as employers was nevertheless remarkable, and did much to ensure that the 1992 project, which could easily have been seen simply as a liberalising and pro-business venture, was perceived as something of interest to the political left as well as the political right.

He was also very sure-footed in his reaction to the geopolitical earthquake brought about by the fall of the Berlin Wall, the reunification of Germany and the end of the Cold War. His optimistic reading of the situation stood in stark contrast to the much more pessimistic interpretations of many of his fellow leaders. And his unflinching advocacy of pressing ahead with the European integration process, and indeed accelerating it to cope with the transformed context, played a central role in persuading his European Council colleagues to make a strengthened Europe their main collective response to the continent's vastly altered geopolitical circumstances. The Maastricht Treaty is an enduring monument to this approach.

With time, however, Delors's push for greater European integration began to produce diminishing returns. 1992 was probably the turning point, as the former President himself acknowledges ⁽²⁾. After this point the popular backlash against the Maastricht Treaty adversely affected both the Commission's own morale and the readiness of Member State governments to be seen to be signing up to further integration. In such circumstances Delors's ability to use his expertise and gift of persuasion to coax national leaders towards ever greater union ebbed away. To the extent that more Europe was needed, Member State governments were tempted

⁽¹⁾ See the notes kept by Bernhard Zepter from 1990 onwards and preserved in Jacques Delors's personal archive.

⁽²⁾ Interview with Jacques Delors, 16 January 2016.

by intergovernmental expedients rather than the extension of the Community method. And the President's own grip within the European Commission was less secure. In part this reflected the dissipation — whether through burnout or the desire for new horizons — of his original and formidable cabinet team. But it also reflected the growing size and scope of the institution — which made tight central control ever harder — and the emergence of a new generation of Commissioners less deferential to their leader. The fact that the final 2 years were also a truncated 'half-mandate', rather than a full third term, did not help matters either. Delors's years as President thus ended somewhat in a minor key, despite the success constituted by the passing of the Delors II package in late 1992.

Overall, however, the Delors presidency looks even more remarkable in hindsight than it did at the time. His 10 years in Brussels were an extraordinary period of change, whether in the overall European institutional system or in the policy remit of the integration process. And while Delors shared responsibility for this with various others, notably the key national leaders, his centrality to this process is beyond dispute. Both the plaudits and the criticisms he attracted as the personification of European integrations during its most dynamic period have much justification in reality.

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