

Transcription of the interview with Jacques Delors — Part 1 — Jacques Delors’s thinking on Europe in the light of the Lisbon Treaty (Paris, 16 December 2009)


Caption: Transcription of the interview with Jacques Delors, President of the Commission of the European Communities from 1985 to 1995, conducted by the Centre Virtuel de la Connaissance sur l’Europe (CVCE) on 16 December 2009 at the Paris-based premises of the think tank ‘Notre Europe’, of which Jacques Delors is the founding director. The interview, conducted by Hervé Bribosia, Research Coordinator at the CVCE, particularly focuses on the following subjects: the think tank ‘Notre Europe’, the concept of a ‘federation of nation states’ and the Community method, the Treaty of Lisbon and the institutional reform of the European Union, the role of the national parliaments, the European Convention and the Treaty establishing a Constitution for Europe, the future of the procedure for the revision of the treaties, the spill-over effect, differentiated integration and reinforced cooperation, the EU’s borders and Turkey’s application for accession.

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I. Jacques Delors, Founder President of the think tank 'Notre Europe'

[Hervé Bribosia] Jacques Delors, thank you very much for agreeing to give this interview. It will be an invaluable contribution to the oral history project about European integration which is being developed by the CVCE, the Centre Virtuel de la Connaissance sur l'Europe. We are meeting at the headquarters of the think tank 'Notre Europe', which you founded and chaired for many years. By way of introduction, could you tell us a little about this association, its resources, its ambitions, its achievements and its influence?

[Jacques Delors] It's quite simple; I left the Commission in January 1995 to pass the torch on to my friend Jacques Santer. I went back to Paris with nothing particular on offer from the French authorities. Luckily, I was in charge of the International Commission on Education for the Twenty-first Century at UNESCO, which gave me something to work with for a few months. And one day, at the European Council, Chancellor Kohl and Mr Gonzales said: 'Well, after all, Mr Delors was President of the Commission for ten years, perhaps we could do something for him.' The other countries said nothing or agreed, and so that was how I came to set up the Notre Europe association. It is an association, I would point out, not a foundation, because it ought now to become a foundation. And each year, the Commission ... kept it going for years. My thanks go to everyone who contributed to the 600 000 euros which allowed us get it off the ground, with Christine Verger, who'd been in my private office, as volunteer. So we launched the association, which I left in 2004 because I'd been there seven years, and then the President was Pascal Lamy. But Pascal Lamy was appointed Director-General of the WTO, and he was succeeded by Tommaso Padoa-Schioppa, Finance Minister in the Prodi Government in Italy, who, once he stopped being a minister because of the elections, agreed to stay on as President of the association, which is a think tank that works very well with a very dynamic, very European team — in fact on Monday and Tuesday it held a fairly difficult but, in the end, very open conference in Belgrade about the Balkans, which is one of our major concerns. So the association is getting along even better than when I was there. And I can tell you it's a remarkable think tank which deserves to be well known on its own site and which is really very European.

II. The concept of a 'federation of nation states' and the Community method

[Hervé Bribosia] Jacques Delors, this concept of a federation of nation states which you have often talked about: what exactly does it cover, and what place should the Community method occupy in it, do you think?

[Jacques Delors] I first mentioned it in 1993, because I was worried about the way things were developing. It is based on two simple ideas. The first one, which the fundamentalist supporters of integration didn't like — well, the dyed-in-the-wool federalists, shall we say — is that the nations, meaning the nations or nation states, will not fade away. The term 'nation states' exasperates some people, I know. Secondly, I said 'federation' because I think the only acceptable, efficient method of government for Europe is to have

federal structures at the top, and so a federation of nation states. A French politician who doesn't like me said it was a contradiction in terms, but when all's said and done it is the solution which reconciles people so that you can say to them: 'You are still French, Belgian, German and so on, but at the same time you're Europeans and the European Union agrees to exercise part of the sovereignty at the European level.' But for that to work, it has to be efficient, and that means there is only one method, the federalist method. So there you have a way of reconciling two things which may seem absurd, or a contradiction in terms to some, but it's the solution which I still advocate today.

[Hervé Bribosia] This federalist method, though, is it the Community method that we're familiar with in its traditional formulation?

[Jacques Delors] Yes, Professor, it was all in the ECSC, the ECSC Treaty. You know, we don't realise how much we owe to the real father of Europe. To begin with, there was the report, the Schuman appeal, whose spiritual value has always been underestimated, the appeal to forgiveness and to a promise. And then, in the ECSC, the important thing was already there, namely a European executive which spends every day thinking about Europe, which had more power under the ECSC Treaty than under the Common Market Treaty. But it was all there, it was all seen by Jean Monnet and others and the people who worked with him, and it is still needed if Europe is to work. I'm not talking about wishful thinking, about what would happen in an ideal world. What I'm saying is this: for Europe to work, we need to go back to the Community method which has by and large been neglected for the last few years.

III. The Lisbon Treaty and the institutional reform of the European Union

[Hervé Bribosia] The Lisbon Treaty, which entered into force two weeks ago — do you think it is meant to complete the institutional reform process launched by the Amsterdam Treaty and then the Nice Treaty? And do you think that reforming the institutions will make the Union more democratic, more effective, better suited to the task of continuing with its own enlargement? Will institutional reform clarify who is responsible for what? And is it in line with the Community method?

[Jacques Delors] More democratic, certainly. The European Parliament has been given wider powers, especially in the areas of justice and security, which are not simple matters because that is where the Member States put up the biggest obstacles; and the second point is that it has the final say on the whole Community budget. We've done away with the distinction between compulsory and non-compulsory expenditure. So from that point of view it is satisfactory. And in the last few years the European Parliament has shown how capable it is. Remember the report on freedom of movement for services. And remember how Parliament, after demonstrations in the street, including demonstrations by the trade unions — that's democracy — found a solution. So I'm very happy with that aspect of the Treaty.

[Hervé Bribosia] But look at the European Council, for example: the Lisbon Treaty makes it more powerful, with a stable President appointed for two and a half years. Is that in line with the Community method?

[Jacques Delors] If you've been keeping up with the news over the last few months, you'll know that I fought for the Council President not to be an executive President but a sort of chairman. The expression they used at the European Council was 'facilitator'. On that point I think I'm fairly happy as a militant for Europe. I don't know if I helped to make it happen. But Mr Van Rompuy is the right man for the job, so he realised that what he had to do was not to push the governments to one side and get involved in everything ... he realised that a *modus vivendi* with the rotating Presidency had to be found. That's what he was in Madrid for. So I think it's a good choice.

[Hervé Bribosia] A good choice appointing Herman Van Rompuy and a good choice creating the job, provided that what it comes down to is acting as a facilitator?

[Jacques Delors] Listen, if I had been President of the Convention, I would never have suggested creating that job. I think that we had what we needed with the President of the Commission, the President of the European Parliament and the rotating Presidency. But since he decided to do it according to the rather French-style idea of a presidential system which is a bit ridiculous from the European point of view, which is ridiculous in fact, well, it was better for it to be Van Rompuy rather than someone else who would have wanted to be the President of Europe and be involved in everything. I'm quite optimistic about the choice of Mr Van Rompuy myself.

[Hervé Bribosia] ... looking at the High Representative of the Union and this new idea of making him do a combined job, since he is supposed to make sure everything the Union does on the external front is consistent, while wearing two hats — firstly as the standing President of the Foreign Affairs Council and secondly within the European Commission, where he will be one of the Vice-Presidents. How do you see that arrangement? Do you think it foreshadows a trend towards fusing the executives together which we've heard about from time to time?

[Jacques Delors] No, I hope not. I won't say any more about it, but I think we need to start by paying tribute to Mr Solana. He did the job tactfully, discreetly and efficiently, with Foreign Ministers who would give him the difficult errands to do. Right. But he did it very well. So Mrs Ashton should take him as her model. But it's quite normal that the person should be a Vice-President of the Commission, provided they don't want to get their hands on every aspect of the Commission's responsibilities. There's more to it than just Foreign Affairs, there's also development aid, there's trade and there are many other fields where there have to be Commissioners in charge. So Mrs Ashton will be judged in the first instance on her ability to avoid exerting an imperialistic effect on the other Commissioners. It's also the responsibility of the President of the Commission. I think that's the first point. Then there is this common diplomatic service. Not an easy thing. I don't want to side with the non-stop critics, but this diplomatic service will have to be handled with a very skilful touch. If as time goes by we were to start feeling a dominant influence from one of Europe's large countries, it would be a failure, it would be a mistake. So Mrs Ashton has to face up to her responsibilities. She must take care not to play too much at being the Foreign Office and, most of all, she must let the Commission's officials play a leading role. Striking the proper balance between people who come in from the Member States' foreign services and people from the Commission is very hard to achieve. Actually a remarkable man who was head of External Relations, Mr Landaburu, did try to strike the balance. He isn't there any more now. But you have to be mindful of it because our countries have different geopolitical and diplomatic traditions. Trying to upset things would be pointless. The fact has to be respected. But the people responsible for doing it also have to respect that.

[Hervé Bribosia] So looking at the European Commission, one of the consequences of the first Irish 'No' to the Lisbon Treaty was giving up the idea of reducing the size of the Commission. So it will go on consisting of as many Members as there are Member States. Is there a risk, or even a deliberate intention in someone's mind, that a Commission with such a surfeit of people in it should be a weaker part of the institutional triangle?

[Jacques Delors] It's what the foreign services in all the countries insist on. I'm confident that Mr Barroso will be able to manage this Commission. Even with 27 members, you can still have a collegial spirit.

[Hervé Bribosia] Even with 35?

[Jacques Delors] We'll see. But perhaps if that happens, we'll end up with constituencies, as we've seen elsewhere. For the moment, though, each country is represented. It has a Commissioner, who can go to his country at the weekend if he has time and explain European policy. It isn't a bad thing, and I trust Mr Barroso in his second term to re-introduce a sort of collegiality where, when the President speaks, he knows that he has the support of all the Commissioners and that all the important issues are discussed in the Commission on Wednesdays. I've no caveats at the moment, I trust him. And I defend the Commission because the organisation which is under the greatest threat, not from its members but from outside, is the Commission, in the institutional triangle and the Community method. You can testify to the fact that over the last few years — Mr Barroso can testify to it as well — I've defended the Commission and its right of

initiative, without which there wouldn't be much to do, given that the Heads of Government have other things to do before their shaving mirrors every day, as we say in France, than talk about Europe.

[Hervé Bribosia] Its right of initiative and its monopoly on initiative.

[Jacques Delors] Yes, I stand by it: it's thanks to that that I was able to set up the Erasmus scheme, so it sticks in my mind, it's important to remember that after all.

[Hervé Bribosia] Ideally, though, speaking personally, would you have been more in favour of a smaller Commission?

[Jacques Delors] No, I wouldn't.

[Hervé Bribosia] Not necessarily ...

[Jacques Delors] No, not for the moment. People aren't ready for that yet. When there are 35 of us, we'll see. But we're not there yet.

IV. The role of the national parliaments after the Lisbon Treaty

[Hervé Bribosia] Looking at the national parliaments now, they've been given a slightly bigger part to play. Do you think that will help to alleviate the alleged democratic deficit in the Union? Might it not also have the effect of weakening the supranational institutions?

[Jacques Delors] Professor, let me remind you of what I always say: it's the national governments who are responsible for the democratic deficit. When they come back from a meeting in Brussels, instead of explaining that we have interests in common, that we've tried to make progress, most of them say: 'I beat the others,' or, if they don't like it, 'It's Brussels's fault.' This is all abominable and nips any emerging *affectio societatis* in Europe in the bud. So it's the governments who are responsible. I'm not against parliaments in Europe, in the name of subsidiarity, being able to say something, if they force their governments to talk to them about Europe when they have taken a decision in Brussels or Strasbourg, that's fine.

V. The European Convention and the Treaty establishing a Constitution for Europe

[Hervé Bribosia] Do you think the Treaty establishing a Constitution for Europe would have been preferable to the Lisbon Treaty, and what was your feeling when the Constitutional Treaty was rejected by the French people and then abandoned for good?

[Jacques Delors] There isn't much difference between the Convention and the Lisbon Treaty, except that the constitutional aspect of it has been taken out.

[Hervé Bribosia] Not too many regrets then?

[Jacques Delors] No, the Lisbon Treaty is what it is. I've told you what my reservations are on certain points. For the moment, I hope it works, but from the outset you put the finger on the essential point. It's the Community method, not simply because I was the President of the Commission. It's because I'm concerned that the 'how' is as important as the 'what'. And the 'how', the only possible method, is the Community method. We can talk about the 'what', let the European Councils decide on the broad lines, but the 'how' is in the Community method. Now I've noticed that for some years now, and Mr Barroso isn't to blame, we've forgotten that point! In the Convention too, to some extent. In fact, why didn't the Convention talk about

either the social dimension or Economic and Monetary Union? It's because it wasn't all that good. There were two vital issues which they left to one side.

[Hervé Bribosia] In principle, on purpose, deliberately, since the Convention didn't theoretically concern itself with the policies ...

[Jacques Delors] Come on, all that's just a joke. Our colleagues in Notre Europe kept track of that on the social dimension, it manifestly didn't interest either the President or the Secretary-General of the Convention, and as for Economic and Monetary Union, they didn't agree, so they pushed it to one side. Yet it's one of the jewels in the crown of European integration. It won't do, it really won't. I don't miss that Convention at all, speaking for myself. Not at all.

[Hervé Bribosia] I was just going to ask you if the failure of the Constitutional Treaty sounds the death knell for the Convention method. And would you miss it?

[Jacques Delors] No, I don't miss it, because I think there was an element of attaching names to things — you're a professor, you know that attaching a name to something with nothing real behind it is pointless. Just attaching names ... and then that French fascination with having a president ... But look at other countries, they have a Prime Minister, a majority, an opposition, so let's just drop the subject, don't let's talk about it. Let's not be too hard on anyone.

[Hervé Bribosia] So you don't miss the Convention method. And you don't miss the constitutional approach either? Do you think the failure of the Constitutional Treaty sounds the death knell for any systematic, all-embracing constitutional approach?

[Jacques Delors] No, I think the Constitution is rather a magic word, but one which sometimes provokes as much opposition as it wins supporters. So that isn't the nub of the matter. As I said, a 'federation of nation states', and I stand by that.

VI. The way forward for the procedure for revising the Treaties relating to the European Union

[Hervé Bribosia] As a matter of fact, now that the Lisbon Treaty has been forceps-delivered, aren't we entitled to think or fear that there won't be a European treaty at all any more, before much longer?

[Jacques Delors] No, all I see is that governments are tired, they're fatigued, and fatigue is a word that's even been carried over into English. So they don't want to produce a treaty straight away, I can understand that. We need to be realistic. Just because we're standing on the banks of the river doesn't mean we have to be critical of the people doing the rowing. But it's not surprising that for the moment we just want to leave it at that, and we'll see what happens later.

[Hervé Bribosia] Is the revision procedure a satisfactory way of moving forward?

[Jacques Delors] No, I don't think so, I think what would be satisfactory would be for it to be made clearer that when a country doesn't agree on anything, it can leave. Because you can't get anywhere like that. Any marriage contract, even the most lightweight, lets you do that. So opt-outs are fine, we allowed two of them at Maastricht so we could move forward, and we were able to set up the euro as a result. And then there was the social chapter, which Mr Blair eventually agreed to, more out of expediency than anything else, since the British didn't follow up on it. But that's enough of that. As far as this goes, we need to stop telling the citizens of Europe fairy stories.

[Hervé Bribosia] As it happens, the Lisbon Treaty does in fact allow for this withdrawal procedure — it is, when all's said and done, a major innovation. It isn't linked to the revision procedure.

[Jacques Delors] It isn't very clear-cut. It doesn't go far enough. People do have to say: 'Will you or won't you?' as they say in a marriage ceremony.

VII. The 'spillover' theory

[Hervé Bribosia] Several times in your writings and speeches you've referred to the functionalist 'spillover' theory, the theory of things being interlinked, according to which implementing one policy necessarily involves moving forward with another.

[Jacques Delors] That's right.

[Hervé Bribosia] What do you think now of the merits or shortcomings of this so-called spillover theory?

[Jacques Delors] If you look at what I've written, I always told the most enthusiastic of Europeans that Economic and Monetary Union wouldn't necessarily lead to political union. So my theory about the spillover effect was true as far as anything related to the economy was concerned.

[Hervé Bribosia] Internal market, Economic and Monetary Union.

[Jacques Delors] Internal market, internal market, hold on! Let's be clear what we mean. When I arrived, if you like, the economic situation wasn't a good one. The 12-member European Community was losing jobs. I said to them: 'The single market will be a stimulus to you.' So there was a spillover effect there, if you look at the results in terms of job and growth creation. Until 1993, when there was the famous recession and then, at the same time, the feel-good sensation in governments. So the spillover effect was tied to the fact that the European countries thought that setting up a great single European space would bring a return. But my theory of spillover effect stopped there. After that, they were the ones who said: 'Well, to manage all that, why not have a single currency?' Not me. OK. But as for the single currency and then a political union in Europe, what I've always said — and you can look at my writings — is that it didn't automatically follow. But the spillover effect did come into play at that time, there's no disputing it.

[Hervé Bribosia] The prospect of the internal market also persuaded Margaret Thatcher to agree to the institutional reform. That's a kind of spillover too.

[Jacques Delors] Yes and no, it's just the fact that, if you like, although Margaret Thatcher has always been my ideological opponent on European issues, she's always been most courteous towards me. Even if she was dead set against it, she couldn't bring the movement to a stop. Because at the beginning a large internal market was in line with the predominant thinking in that period of deregulation, and then when she said no to the draft treaty on the social rights of workers — not a treaty but a declaration which I had had drafted so as not to always look as though I were the Catholic socialist intellectual she accused me of being, so I had it done by the Economic Committee — she opted out but she didn't oppose it. And as early as 1988, when the idea of setting up a group on EMU came up, she said: 'As long as it's a study, I agree.' Then after that she exercised her right of reprisal against the Governor of the Bank of England who had unfortunately signed the document, which was a paper on how to proceed and not on what to do.

[Hervé Bribosia] We'll come to that ...

[Jacques Delors] So I have a great deal of respect for her, because she didn't share my ideas but she always behaved very properly towards me, so I would like to send her — and I know she hasn't been well — a respectful nod.

VIII. Differentiated integration and enhanced cooperation

[Hervé Bribosia] Do you still see the idea of a vanguard or a multi-speed Europe as a way of solving the equation as between deepening or widening the European Union?

[Jacques Delors] Absolutely, yes, 100 %. I think that without differentiated integration — it's Double Dutch but you know what it means — we wouldn't have had Schengen or the euro. So in the years to come, with 27 or 32 members, some of the countries will have to take it upon themselves to go further. Now you're going to say to me: 'But Mr Delors, what specific ideas do you have?' Well, I have two. Striking a new balance between the economic and the monetary sides in Economic and Monetary Union: that is going to be top of the news agenda in 2010, because there is a European Council scheduled for February on that very subject and no other, and then there's Lisbon. We'll see what happens. Secondly, still on the same idea, it seems to me that European integration needs some momentum behind it. The momentum comes from moving forward, but in ways which do not call the marriage contract as a whole into question. So I am still a partisan of differentiation or advanced forms of cooperation. I hear that Mrs Merkel is against them. Well, in that case I'm against Mrs Merkel.

IX. The EU's frontiers and Turkey's application for membership

[Hervé Bribosia] This is always a sensitive issue, but what do you think are the ultimate borders of Europe or the European Union? Do you think that Turkey's application for membership is appropriate, and above all what do you think of the way the application is being handled by the Union?

[Jacques Delors] On the one hand, I think that as far as the enlargement of the Union is concerned the European Commission hasn't been very rigorous over the last few years. When Montenegro split off from Serbia, to be frank, I wouldn't have raised a cry of victory, because I remember what Freud said about the love of small differences. And I ask myself, if all the countries are going to start fragmenting soon, as a reaction to history perhaps, but also as a reaction to globalisation, where are we headed for, I wonder? I didn't much like all that. I would have been a bit more reserved, I wouldn't have said anything against it, though it's not up to me ... But all the same, there you are. As for the rest, if you'd been asking me about this in the 1950s, if you'd have said to me: 'How many countries will there be in Europe?' I wouldn't have been able to give you the right forecast. Why? Because Europe has to face up to the challenges of history. It has had to deal with three major ones. At the beginning of the 1970s, should it have let the United Kingdom in? It's still a topical question. Well anyway, it was admitted, and Ireland with it. Secondly, what was to be done with the countries emerging from dictatorships, Greece and Spain? We were magnificent and they were magnificent. It was a complete success. People don't realise that as much as they should. Those countries which had just been through dictatorships found a way to flourish and to prosper in Europe. And thirdly, there was the fall of the Berlin Wall. How can we have been so peevish about all that in France? You do realise that Europe wasn't made for us? It was made for every country in Europe. Opening our arms to those countries was wonderful, it was us speaking from the heart. It was the heart that used to beat in Robert Schuman's breast ... So as for me, looking to the future, I say there will be other historic challenges. And since you ask me the most burning question, the one about Turkey, let me give you an answer. Unlike some, I would never have said a categorical 'No' to Turkey because, by doing that, we nurture fundamentalism and reinforce the idea that we are privileged, Christian people — broadly speaking at any rate, because there are a great many things one could say about that, there are many religious practices. The practice of Christianity has dwindled a great deal. There you are, I would have said 'Yes' to negotiating and I condemn all those who said 'No' to negotiating.

[Hervé Bribosia] We said 'Yes' to negotiating ...

[Jacques Delors] What?

[Hervé Bribosia] We've said 'Yes' to negotiating now.

[Jacques Delors] Yes, yes, I keep up with that on a daily basis. For example, I'm worried to see that the Turkish constitutional court wants to ban a Kurdish party. I follow it on a daily basis, I'm not naive. But I disagree with the French, the Germans and others who said 'No' to Turkey from the outset. Because that isn't a historical vision of things, one which fights against all those who deny the existence of other people because they do not think the way we do, because they want a different kind of regime. I'm quite categorical about that.