

A STATE OF MIND

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Princeton University Professor Anne Marie Slaughter, once Director of Policy Planning under former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, had long ago argued in favour of the European Union's form of international governance. Not because it is inherently better or because it represents an ideal model but because, as she put it, nothing else will work.

The EU model, in essence still an ongoing experiment, has grown more intricate, constantly expanding and deepening. The one thing that has failed to catch up is the quality of its leadership. In recent years, governed by a set of uninspiring leaders, appointees of convenience rather than of vision, this generation of European political figures has clearly not been able to tackle the project let alone move it forward.

Yet, despite the pervasive mediocrity both at member state and institutional level, despite also the cumbersome nature of the operations and decision making processes, the premise of Professor Slaughter still stands strong. The EU works and should continue to work because in the deteriorating nature of the world, there is no other recipe.

There have been difficult dilemmas. The reverberating fall out of the financial crisis in Cyprus, with all the faults of the Cypriot banking sector and the calamitous incompetence of its previous communist government, was not, however, as many seem to portray it, a one-off mistake or a mere misrepresentation over the type of haircut suffered by investors. It is, disproportionately perhaps, evidence of a much deeper internal EU problem and as such it should serve as a wake up call for all those who want to see the European Union move forward.

If the European Union is no longer going to be about forging meaningful political collaboration but instead to impose take-it-or-leave-it decisions, it will never succeed. If, also, the European Union is going to be about punishing member states instead of offering solidarity, it will no doubt fail.

Leadership is not about stepping on the wounded when they are down, especially with knee-jerk decisions at the end of late night Council sessions. Equally, leadership is certainly not about tweeting and trivializing delicate institutional decisions as with Eurogroup chief Jeroen Dijsselbloem, whose childish handling was not only an insult to his colleagues but to all those legendary figures who had fought hard for him to be able to sit where he now sits.

Jacques Delors had once remarked «Europe is not just about material results, it is about spirit. Europe is a state of mind». This is precisely what seems to be missing. When the Finance Minister of Malta wrote about the inhuman treatment afforded by the Eurogroup to their Cypriot colleague last month, it was clear that this 'state of mind' was absent.

It all seems to boil down to this: Just as the rest of Europe had once needed Germany to recover quickly from WWII, so will Germany soon need the rest of Europe to recover from the economic state it is in. In German the word for 'state of mind' is «Verfassung» which, unfortunately, though not curiously, also carries the meaning of «governance», «charter» and, yes, «constitution». For the EU to return, as it should, to the constitutional path, real leaders will again become necessary.