

Tommaso the European

It has been widely acknowledged that Tommaso Padoa-Schioppa was a great European. But what was his brand of that vague, ambiguous and often abused definition? I have known him for more than thirty years and the comments that follow are based on a long tradition of frequent personal and frank exchanges. He knew what I thought of him. He was a rare example of somebody who is “Spinelli” in his heart and “Monnet” in his mind. I never heard him advocating an instant direct election of a “President of Europe” or even a EU’s budget of more than 5% of the Union’s GDP. Like Monnet, he always asked the question: “What is the next step?” He focused on what is necessary and possible rather than on what is desirable. His intellectual approach to Europe is embodied in his famous paper on the “impossible quadrangle” of a single market, freedom of capital movements, flexible exchange rates and national monetary policies; a paper that set the conceptual basis for the single currency. Like Monnet he knew that European solutions are only possible when national governments are trapped in unsolvable contradictions. He also knew that what we were doing was inherently unstable and that there would be inevitable new challenges created by past achievements, whose outcome would, again, be unpredictable. However, he never doubted that a European Federation should be the final objective. I cannot help thinking that Jacques Delors belongs in the same category of “Europeans”. I heard that, after Tommaso’s death he said, “He was more federalist than me”; however I suspect that the difference is more emotional than rational. After all, Tommaso was Italian: a true one, of a breed whose genes are sadly being lost. Like Delors, he had the rare gift to be able to simplify complex subjects.

He was deeply convinced of the importance of the institutional set up. However, he was more interested in promoting more widespread majority voting, rather in enhancing the authority of the Commission. On this we disagreed because I think that majority voting among sovereign states, although a necessary precondition for progress, is a fragile and elusive instrument in the absence of a strong central pillar. Maybe, he didn’t like to speak too much about the Commission because he knew that it would have led him to harsh criticism of Delors’s successors; something that was not in his style. More recently, he was one of the first to advocate that the President of the Commission should emerge from the campaign for the elections to the European Parliament: a very “federalist” idea that I utterly support and that should be regarded as a matter of life and death by the still embryonic European political parties.

Tommaso was sitting on the boarder between politics and public service, a race that it is difficult to define, but that provides some of “the best and the brightest” in our democracies. He never wanted to cross that line and step into the dirt and blood of the political arena, a move that would have been incompatible with his “gentle” approach to human relations and public affairs. He was no “utopian”, nor would I describe him as an optimist. He was rather somebody who considered it a moral duty to reject pessimism. Sometimes, particularly when we spoke about Italian affairs, I teased him that he was slightly “panglossian”; out of a long list of negative events, he always insisted in digging out something that could be deemed encouraging.

When he left us prematurely, his main preoccupation was the future of the Euro: how to complete the job that Maastricht had left unfinished. He was struggling to give content to the notion of “fiscal union”, a phrase that has recently replaced “economic government” in the European “narrative” (although I suspect that Tommaso the man of culture would have never used this American neologism). He was uniquely placed to contribute to the enterprise; he was one non-German capable of looking at the “centre of Europe” with sympathy and understanding, but without the inferiority complex and suspicion that afflicts so many in Europe and beyond. Sadly, Tommaso was not allowed to fulfil this task; it may have been the most important achievement of his life. For my

part, I keep what I regard his most important message: disciplines, however well conceived and structured, will never impose themselves on democratically elected Parliaments in the absence of common instruments and a recognised central authority. That was Tommaso the “federalist” at his best.

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