

Christine Lagarde: The courage to build a Europe that endures

Speech by Ms Christine Lagarde, President of the European Central Bank, at the dinner preceding the Charlemagne Prize ceremony, Aachen, 13 May 2026.

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It is a particular pleasure to be here in Aachen – the city of Charlemagne – to celebrate Mario Draghi, our dear friend.

To speak of Charlemagne is to speak, almost inevitably, of the idea of European unity.

That is a natural association. Charlemagne was a singular leader, one whose realm reached across lands that today span several European countries.

Mario belongs to that same tradition.

I have had the good fortune, over many years, to observe him at close quarters: in different institutions, in different circumstances and under pressures that few ever encounter.

What has always struck me is how consistently he has been guided by a single conviction: that Europe is stronger when it builds together than when it retreats into itself.

But there is another, less well-known side to Charlemagne's legacy.

Few people associate Charlemagne with fragmentation. And yet the empire he built did not last for long after him. What had appeared to be a moment of European unity became, in historical terms, only that: a moment.

Charlemagne's achievement depended, to an extraordinary degree, on Charlemagne himself. But the institutions beneath it were not strong enough to survive the shock of his absence.

We can draw two lessons from this history.

The first is the importance of remarkable individuals. There are moments when history does not move by committee. These are the very moments when courage and resolve become decisive.

But the second lesson is that leadership is not enough. The task of statesmanship is to turn decisive moments into institutions that endure.

Few people in European public life today have understood both lessons as deeply as Mario.

Building Europe

He understood this because he looked back at post-war Europe and saw what defined its greatest leaders.

The founding generation knew that the devastation of the Second World War had discredited the old order – and that it fell to them to build something better. Few saw this more clearly than Jean Monnet and Robert Schuman.

They began with the European Coal and Steel Community, placing the industries that had armed Europe's wars under shared governance. In doing so, they established a precedent that would shape everything that followed: states would secure their future by sharing authority through common institutions.

It was this new and more confident Europe that shaped Mario's generation: a Europe that knew what it stood for and was proud of the values it chose to defend.

Jacques Delors carried that tradition into another age.

When he arrived in Brussels, Europe had lost momentum. The common market existed in principle, but in practice it was still obstructed by barriers and national exceptions.

Delors saw that Europe needed a project equal to the moment: the Single Market. But he also saw where the logic of integration would lead. A Europe that wished to bind its markets together would eventually have to confront the instability of separate currencies and divergent monetary policies. The Single Market opened the path to monetary union.

And it was there that Mario stepped onto the European stage: helping to build our common currency, the euro.

As Director General of the Italian Treasury, Mario headed the Italian delegation negotiating the Maastricht Treaty. He was there when Europe laid the foundations for the euro. And later, as President of the ECB, he would lead the institution created to safeguard it.

But when the sovereign debt crisis struck, it became clear that those foundations were incomplete. Europe had created a currency, but not yet all the means needed to protect it against the storm.

Once again, Europe's fate turned on an individual willing to act. And it was Mario who stepped forward.

His commitment to do "whatever it takes" to preserve the euro, within the ECB's mandate, became the turning point of the crisis. It was an act of institutional leadership: the point at which the central bank made it clear that the euro was an irreversible commitment.

But it was also an act of personal leadership.

Looking back now, the choice can seem almost inevitable. But it was not. For those who lived through that crisis – and I remember this vividly from my time as French

Finance Minister and Managing Director of the IMF – the path ahead was deeply uncertain.

But Mario understood that inaction is also a policy choice. And when inaction would compromise the mandate entrusted to an institution, it becomes a choice of the greatest consequence.

His intervention marked the start of an evolution for the ECB. It also bought Europe time: to reinforce its fiscal rules, to create new crisis mechanisms and to begin the banking union.

So here again, Mario followed the pattern of true European statesmanship: answering the call when it mattered most, and creating the conditions for Europe to emerge with stronger institutions.

The work unfinished

That brings us to the world Europe faces today.

The true lesson of our history is that the work of strengthening Europe is never complete. Each generation discovers, under the pressure of new challenges, where the European project remains unfinished – and where it must be strengthened if it is to endure.

When I became President of the ECB, I remember Mario telling me: don't worry, the crisis years have passed; from here on in, it should be plain sailing.

It did not quite turn out that way. I am still waiting for that plain sailing, Mario. In the last few years, the world around us has been changing at extraordinary speed.

The pandemic revealed the fragility of global supply chains. Russia's invasion of Ukraine brought war back to our continent and exposed, brutally, how vulnerable Europe's energy supplies had become.

The United States and China have entered a new age of industrial strategy and geopolitical competition – intensified by tariff wars and rare-earth battles – and all this amid the worst energy crisis on record.

Europe now finds itself in a world that is far less forgiving of the gaps in its institutional architecture. Institutions that were built for an earlier age are being tested by demands they were not fully designed to meet.

So it was no surprise that Commission President von der Leyen turned to Mario to diagnose where Europe was falling short, and what it would take to make us capable of acting in this new world.

Mario has always kept truth at the centre of his judgement. Ask him a serious question, and you will receive a serious answer – clear, and not always comfortable.

His report on European competitiveness – for which he is receiving this prize – identified Europe's weaknesses with unnerving accuracy: a single market still incomplete; energy markets too fragmented; capital markets too segmented; defence industries still divided along national lines.

But its great achievement was larger than diagnosis alone. Mario showed that competitiveness is more than an economic question. It is about whether Europe can preserve its prosperity and remain the master of its own destiny in the world we now face.

And since publishing the report, he has continued to do what he has done throughout his career: concentrate minds and insist that Europe look directly at the scale of the task before it.

That is the work that an exceptional individual can do. But it is not the whole task at hand.

Mario can diagnose the problem. He can use his authority to break complacency. But he cannot, from outside office, build the institutions that Europe lacks.

That responsibility lies with Europe's leaders. They are the ones who must act on Mario's diagnosis. They are the ones who must decide whether this moment becomes another missed opportunity, or another step in Europe's construction.

The tradition is there; each generation of European leaders has faced its defining test. Monnet and Schuman answered the call after the war. Delors answered it when Europe had stalled. And Mario answered it when the euro was in danger.

Now Europe's leaders must answer it in their turn – and build what endures. What they need is the courage to act. And if they are looking for an example of what that courage looks like, they need look no further than Mario.

Congratulations, Mario, on receiving the Charlemagne Prize.