

'Portrait of a super-minister', from 30 jours d'Europe (June 1971)

Caption: In June 1971, the monthly publication 30 jours d'Europe paints a portrait of Karl Schiller, appointed West German Minister for Economic Affairs and Finance one month earlier.

Source: 30 jours d'Europe. dir. de publ. Fontaine, François ; Réd. Chef Chastenet, Antoine. Juin 1971, n° 155. Paris: Service d'information des Communautés européennes. "Portrait d'un super-ministre", auteur:de Kergorlay, Henry , p. 14-15.

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Portrait of a super-minister

Three nicknames sum up the career of Charles Schiller, university don. At the end of the war, his students called him 'Chic Charles', not only because of the impeccable cut of his suits, but also because his way of teaching was markedly different from that of his colleagues. There was nothing fusty or dusty in his manner: this was a man who loved and encouraged discussion. In debate, he demonstrated humour and wit. He was often kind, occasionally caustic, but it was only pretentious ignoramuses who experienced his merciless side. He would hound them until they were clearly humiliated for good. While affable, Schiller knew how to keep his distance. As Rector of Hamburg University, he was entitled to be called 'Your Magnificence', and one student who addressed him as 'Mr Schiller' received the dry reply: 'Why not call me Charlie, since you are at it?'

Some time later, as Minister for Economic Affairs in the Berlin Government, he was to make a somewhat different impression on his colleagues. They complained that he sought personal glory, was unable to tolerate criticism and frequently threatened to resign if he did not get his own way. These prima-donna mannerisms were to earn him the nickname of 'the Callas of the Socialist Party'.

And now the federal capital's political circles are calling him Charlemagne, not only because he is in charge of two important ministries (Finance and Economic Affairs) but also because, after the Chancellor, he is the most important member of the Government. To a great extent, the success of his economic and financial policy will determine the result of the 1973 parliamentary elections. This is not the first time that Mr Schiller has felt responsible for his party's political future. When he was appointed Minister for Economic Affairs in October 1966, he had the task of pulling West Germany out of recession. His success, in the broad-based coalition government headed by Kiesinger, contributed to Willy Brandt's rise to power three years later.

A trendy sexagenarian

Now he is faced with a more difficult challenge. Yet the task is to his liking, requiring as it does the application of all of his physical, intellectual and moral strength. And Mr Schiller is happy only when he is fully committed and aware of the gravity of the situation. Brandt has given him a free hand. Schiller plans to make good use of it, with a sometimes rather imperious tone that grates on his interlocutors. He knows how to impose his opinions, and demands rapid implementation of his orders. Schiller reflects at length before taking decisions. His most fruitful thinking time is the morning, before he arrives at the office. When he is certain of his solution, there is nothing, be it sarcasm or criticism, that may dissuade him. He is tenacious to the point of stubbornness.

As Minister for Finance and Economic Affairs, Schiller approaches all his tasks in an enthusiastic and youthful way. At 60 years of age, he remains astonishingly young. His physical appearance, with black hair, greying slightly at the temples, a slim figure and a youthful face, is that of a man 10 to 15 years his junior. An untiring party-goer, he is always ready to dance the latest dances, shaking his arms and legs about like a young man and shouting out where appropriate. In his choice of aftershave, the decor of his flat and the planning of his work, he has the tastes of an under-40. One wall of his living-room is decorated with a huge photograph of the Beatles on a bright red background. The hallway has a blown-up photograph of Manhattan that he took himself. The inside of the front door is decorated with another strikingly original photograph, a melancholic young girl standing alone in the ruins of Berlin's Tiergarten. It is not his three children, the offspring of two marriages, who have decorated his four-room flat in Bonn; their father did it all in his own way.

Attracted by success

When Schiller has a task in hand, the former university don seems once more to revert to being a student. He makes endless plans and drafts endless projects with the single-mindedness and zeal of an examination candidate. He does not work alone, preferring to surround himself with those he calls his 'comrades in arms', all of them senior civil servants aged under 40, for in his view it is important for a person to reach success before the age of 40. He discusses untiringly with his team the improvements to be made to the

programmes before the final versions are submitted to the Council of Ministers; during these lengthy sessions, he drinks gallons of coffee and smokes like a chimney. Late-night sessions do not stop him from rising at seven the next morning. After a substantial breakfast, including a bowl of porridge, he arrives at the Ministry at about 10 a.m. and rarely leaves before 10 at night. Highly-strung, he takes a brief break during the day to 'recharge his batteries' and a one-hour nap after lunch in a room adjoining his office.

As a believer in success, Schiller prefers to associate only with successful people. He may boast that he has succeeded in everything he has attempted. He is aware that the trials of the next few months will be far greater than those which he has had to face in the past. But he is confident that his good luck will see him through. Charlemagne is calm as he prepares to play the decisive hand.

Henry de Kergorlay