

Interview with Jacques-René Rabier (Luxembourg, 8 February 2002)

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When I first arrived, a lot of questions were running through my head concerning Monnet. You would read in the papers that he was ‘a mysterious man, with links to international networks’, but, in the end, I came to realise that he was a very simple man, even transparent in many ways. He placed the utmost confidence in his staff — once he had weighed them in the balance and judged them — he placed the utmost confidence in them. As a simple man, he liked others to speak to him in a simple manner. Throughout the day, he would gather his staff about him — those of his staff in whom he had most confidence — and we would discuss matters together in an extremely relaxed fashion, paying no attention to one another’s age or political background. Monnet attached no importance to his colleagues’ political backgrounds; it was something that he never asked about. His behaviour was very simple — perhaps somewhat American in style, for he had spent a lot of time in the United States — very simple, even at table when we received journalists or some MP in the small dining room of the Planning Commission in rue de Martignac in Paris. It would be salad and cheese — with a glass of cognac, nonetheless ... table water, but a glass of cognac, because Monnet did come from a family of cognac merchants. To sum up then: simplicity and openness.

As for his opinions, for his political leanings, I should say that he was a Democrat — in the American sense of the word. He was in close contact with MPs and those in power, of whatever political tendency, both in France and elsewhere. On one occasion, he told me that he voted Socialist, but this did not prevent him from maintaining excellent relations with members of the Government who held quite different views — as became apparent later on, incidentally. Robert Schuman is the best example — perhaps we shall come back to this later — but a climate of trust developed between Schuman and Monnet, although they were very different in terms of conventional political attitudes. This goes to show that Monnet was much more concerned with the issues, with the substance, than with labels.

One day — while we are on the subject of Monnet and politics — it was in 1946 or 1947, I think, the Blum one party Government had just been formed, and a Minister had been given responsibility for the Plan. It was Félix Gouin, Minister of State for Planning. Monnet was not very pleased that there should be a Minister for Planning, because he had direct access to the Prime Minister on his own account. (Under the Fourth Republic he was called the President of the Council.) So, one evening, he said to me ‘Gouin is to have the Planning Ministry’ — he was looking for a Principal Private Secretary for his Ministry — ‘and I told him that I was putting you at his disposal.’ I replied, ‘But sir, I don’t carry a Socialist party card!’ ‘Pah!’ said Monnet, ‘These days, everyone’s a Socialist.’ It was just a joke! But it does point to a certain distancing. He was a Democrat, and, as such, he understood party politics perfectly, but party politics in the sense of how they interacted.

He had his convictions — I believe that under different circumstances he would have voted for Giscard — it was not contempt for politicians in general, it was his approach to political labels which did not see them in terms of absolutes. Again, it was the substance rather than the label. He was an extremely demanding person. He was always polite to his staff — unlike certain eminent figures whom I could name, both men and women, who would throw papers at their staff when they lost their tempers. Monnet was always most polite, but also most demanding. It was essential that a letter, even a simple letter of acknowledgement, should correspond exactly to what he wanted, and, if it did not, it had to be done again. ‘Did I sign this letter?’ ‘Yes, sir.’ ‘Has it been posted?’ ‘Yes, sir. It left yesterday.’ ‘Has he got it?’ ‘Very well, sir, I shall ...’ ‘Tell me if he got it and, after that, tell me if he has read it.’ So, he paid tremendous attention to detail.

He was far sighted, a man of vision, but, at the same time, one who paid the greatest attention to detail, and his staff was obliged to follow his example. Yet, sometimes, he would accompany this with a mischievous smile, perhaps with a hint of a wink, but he was extremely sensitive to circumstance and to individuals. But so demanding! You were not allowed to be found wanting, forget a letter or lose sight of a problem.