

Interview with Lord Plowden
by Dr. Richard Mayne

2nd February, 1982

RM The first question I was going to ask you really was when you first met Monnet, I think it was early in the war, was it not?

ENP No, that is not so, Monnet put that in his memoirs but in fact I did not meet him until I became Chief Planner in the early part of 1947.

RM That is very interesting. It was a mistake he made out of sheer forgetfulness. You met him, then, when he went to see Cripps, is that it?

ENP I either met him in London on such an occasion or I met him in Paris, I cannot remember. In a sense I was not quite his opposite number. I was certainly not as distinguished as Jean, but he was the head of the Commissariat du Plan and I was Chief Economic Planner then in the Cabinet Office.

RM How did he strike you when you first saw him?

ENP Oh, a very remarkable man. Indeed I always did feel that when I saw him. I became a great friend of mine and I went on seeing him really to shortly before he died.

RM What was the most characteristic thing about him, do you think ?

ENP His single-minded persistence in following whatever interested him at the time and disregarding anything else.

RM How did that show itself when you first met him?

ENP I do not think I can really remember, but some time in the early .. because we saw each other fairly often - well often for an official of one country to see an official of another country. It was single-mindedness in pursuing the unification of Europe and his belief that the British would want to take part in that, but his really perhaps rather cynical view that the British would not want to do it unless and until they saw the thing really worked and that they would want to join.

RM I know he said that in his memoirs. He always used to say it in private of course too, but I wondered about the famous occasion when you and I think Alan Hitchman and Robert Hall went over to Houjarray and spen - what was it, four days or something - with Uri and Hirsch and Monnet. Could you describe that ?

ENP That was, I think, in April 1949 and this arose out of an exchange of views I think he had had with Stafford Cripps as to whether there could not be some unification of the British and French economies and we went to discuss a wide variety of things and it was on that occasion that he made two remarks that have staid very firmly in my own mind. The first was he said "What you have got to remember is that with the exception of the neutrals and the United Kingdom, every country in Europe has been occupied by an enemy army of occupation and that therefore those countries are completely disillusioned with their institutions and they are prepared for major change". And it was also, I think, on that occasion that he said to me: "Well, you English, you will not want to join any theoretical organisation, you will only feel able to join something when you see it works and when it does work you will then want to join". Of course the truth was, that it was was exactly what did happen and we missed a great many opportunities as a result.

RM I remember him saying to me that once the British joined the Common Market, they will think they invented it !

ENP Yes, I think there was something in that. The trouble was that it was very difficult for this country to realise what advantages they could get out of joining up with the Continent. To start with, I think rightly, the Foreign Office held the view very strongly that the United Kingdom

had been rescued in two world wars through the intervention of the United States and, indeed, if the United States had been involved anyway before the second world war, there would not have been a second world war. Therefore, they were determined to keep the United States involved in Europe. I think what people forget is that the Americans really did want to go home. They did not want to be involved in Europe and they thought one of way of getting out would be to push the British into Europe. So there was that, always there, in the thoughts of what we might do. The other was, well what are we going to get out of these Continentals? After all, the Germans had started two world wars and they had been defeated in each; the French ran away; the Italians changed sides and the Belgians and the Dutch ran away too. I mean, those are very harsh views but those were, if one thinks about it, the views of the British people in the middle 40's. I think Jean understood that. He was very realistic - he knew the English very well and he ... I do not believe in the discussions we had with him in April 1949 he really believed that the English were going to do anything about it, but he felt it was right to give them a chance and then when they did not, he then went away and formed what was - was it not? - in those days called the Schuman plan, the coal and steel .

RM To come back to the 1949 meeting, there is a rather, I think, unkind account of it by Etienne Hirsch in some publication whose name I forget, in which he said two things that struck me. One is that Monnet was wanting to talk about long term planning and long term buying arrangements, whereas the British, i.e. your team, were thinking really, he says, in terms of exchanging French meat for British coal. The other thing is that the German problem - the problem of German resurgence - and competition had not so far as one could gather impinged on the British at that time. Do you think that Hirsch is right?

ENP I think that he is right about the first in the sense that we were thinking in terms of commercial exchanges and indeed I think there is extant somewhere a letter that I wrote to Monnet in the autumn setting this out. So I think he is right to that extent, but Monnet realised that because we were not thinking in terms of the surrender of sovereignty which Monnet was always thinking about the surrender of sovereignty to somebody, the British never thought about that and indeed today they

do not think about it. They hate it. So I think to that extent he was right. I do not know that the German problem really was a very live one in our minds. I think what he also said in that article was that one of the reasons it was a failure to achieve what Monnet set out, was because I did not have the same influence with the British Government as Monnet had with the French Government. Well, that undoubtedly is perfectly true but if I had been the most powerful civil servant that had ever been seen, I could not have influenced the British Government at that time - they were not interested, Ernie Bevin particularly because when we came back with a few suggestions, Stafford Cripps took them to Ernie Bevin and he just was not interested. I mean he did not think in terms of tying ourselves up in any way with a lot of damn foreigners on the Continent.

RM In Andrew Schonfield's book, "Modern Capitalism", I think he suggests even that one of the failures of the first postwar Labour Government was to do any real long term planning and that Cripps particularly tended to confuse planning with controls. I do not know whether you agree with that view ?

ENP I think that it would be true to say that the Labour Government did not really know what they meant about planning and that the concept of what they talked about when they talked about planning was a mixture of what was set out in the Coalition Government's White Paper on full employment in 1944 and doctrinaire socialism which was not very clearly defined. I think that is true but I think what one has got to remember is that the British economy - the British nation - was more mobilised than any other economy that fought in the war. I do not know about Russia. I cannot say, but in Western ... more than the Germans - more was got out of it than anyone, and the Labour Government, whatever they felt about doctrinaire planning, they were faced with very real problems of reconstruction - how did you turn this highly mobilised economy devoted to war back to a peacetime thing. At the same time as they had complete lack of understanding on the part of the Americans' hard currency problems perhaps the sort of general lack of understanding of the German problem hanging round our necks, we had to keep the Germans alive, then the whole question of how did you escape from Empire. I meant that was that. So, I mean, and again they were still maintaining the third largest armed

forces in the world. After the American and the Russian, the British armed forces were far greater than those of anyone else. I think people forget. They think in terms of today. You can sit still and make grandiose plans as to whether you join this or that or the other.. but day by day you were faced with how to make the wheels go round. After all, you have to remember 1947, January 21st or 27th, began the great freeze up and the economy nearly came to a standstill. All the arrangements that were made, clearing arrangements to buy goods virtually on a sort of a barter basis from other people - all those things were very real. Those were the things that were occupying us day by day - not thinking about what was going to happen in 1951. You may be dead in 1951, or long before that !

RM No, I am sure that is right and it is something that is very easy to forget. I read a lot of history of this period as I am writing a book on the subject, and you find so many young academics who just sit there and contemplate the follies of their elders and do not realise that their elders are actually grappling with day-to-day headaches.

ENP I expect we did commit a lot of follies but it was grappling with day-to-day things that could go grossly wrong.

RM One of the things that struck me in reading Uri's account in Monnet's papers of that meeting was how very similar the diagnosis of the problem was on both sides of the Channel, and really how very impressive some of the British efforts on the export drive had been. I think he quote 160% instead of 150% as projected, and the increase of exports and so on, and the great coincidence between the development plans that Monnet had - that you, Uri and Cripps had. Is that an accurate picture ?

ENP I think so, yes. At this distance of time it is difficult to remember more than the generality of what I have just said of how really we were more concerned with getting through the next few months than we were with what was going to be the ultimate structure of the post-war world. I think the other thing one has got to remember is that this country had fought longer than anyone else, we won the war, it still was the center of a great Empire and it was awfully difficult for politicians and the people at large to realise the great change that had taken place in their fortunes and their ultimate position in the world which now we know about

but which then was difficult to foresee. We were still part of the "Big Three" or whatever it was called, and that, I think, coloured all the thinking as to how... Of course, if one had been a genius one would have seen the changes that were going to take place but it was very difficult to think: "Well, we have got to give all that up and surrender sovereignty to some vague body".

RM I am interested when you say "vague" because one of the things that struck me about the to-ings and fro-ings of 1950 when Monnet came to London, and so on, was that the British were very struck by the vagueness of the Schuman Plan, as it was called. It was simply a declaration. Is that right ?

ENP I think that is true, yes. It really was not an economic plan, it was a political plan, it was in order to get the countries of Europe together to surrender sovereignty in a particular field. That, of course, as Monnet himself recognised, did not appeal to the British at all. They wanted something practical.

RM Once the Schuman Plan had come into existence and the High Authority was in Luxembourg, Monnet says in his memoirs that he came to London again and I think you gave a dinner for some of the heads of departments of the civil service. Do you remember that ?

ENP I think I only remember it from reading it in Monnet's book. I vaguely remember it. Could I just say, in relation to the discussions we had in April 1949, you have got to realise that we were then, all three of us on the British side, preoccupied with what we were going to do about Sterling and I think it is fair to say that Robert Hall and I had reached the conclusion, I think about February of that year, that Sterling had to be devalued. And Stafford Cripps was strongly against it. A great many people were strongly against it. And that really was at the back of our minds all the time while we were discussing things at Bazoches.

RM That is very interesting, because one of the reasons the French had so little service to pay on their national debt was because of the depreciation of the franc. Was that on your mind too ?

ENP No, I don't think we thought about that. I think what we thought about was what we were going to do and how we were going to get Sterling.. how first of all we were going to persuade ministers that it had to be done.

RM Was that because of the servicing problem, the debt problem, or was it because of the competitive problem ?

ENP Sterling was grossly over-valued and just as it was quite recently in the last 15 months or whatever.

RM I would like to return, if I may, to the Three Wise Men of NATO, which is something that tends to get left out now in the history books. Even in Monnet's memoirs there is a very brief reference to it. Can you recall that in any detail ?

ENP I can recall it quite clearly. Your remark that it has got a very brief mention in Monnet's memoirs. You may be interested to know that just when, unbeknown to me, Monnet was completing his memoirs, my wife and I went down and had lunch with Monnet at Bazoches - we were in Paris for some reasons - and he said to me: "I am finishing my book. I have said some very nice things about you". And so I said I was grateful for that and what did he say about the Three Wise Men? "Oh" he said, "I have not mentioned them". And I said "But why haven't you mentioned them?" and "Well" he said " they were completely unimportant". I said "Well, I simply don't agree with you. I think that it was extremely important and really a milestone in the development of an alliance that one should really look jointly at what kind of contribution each member of the alliance should make to the joint defence". "Oh" he said, "do you think so?" I said "Well, I do think so and I think you ought to say something about it". "Well, he said, "all right, I will ring up...." (I have forgotten who was ghosting the book for him). He rang up then and there, and that was why there was something in it and that was why it was so brief. If I had not by chance had lunch with him he would not have mentioned it at all.

RM This is extraordinary. Where did you meet when you were being Wise Men ? What did you actually do ? Where did you meet, in Paris ? London ?

ENP We met at La Faisanderie which is No. 2.. - tant pis , I cannot remember. That is off the Avenue Foch. We met there every day for five months I suppose - when I say every day, I mean nearly every day. I can honestly say that Monnet was not interested really in the exercise. He was extremely difficult and, as he said to me on that occasion I have just mentioned, he did not believe it was really important. This was not something that surrendered sovereignty to an international body. It was an old-fashioned alliance and as such he was not really interested. What he was determined about was that the French contribution should not be increased, which I can understand.

RM Was Monnet helpful in the discussions of the Three Wise Men ?

ENP I think it would be fair to say what I said a moment ago, he really was not interested in the exercise. He did not see that out of the NATO alliance would come a sort of super-national body that he hoped would solve the problems of Europe. So at the beginning because of his lack of interest I think it would be fair to say that he was extremely obstructive. Anyway, Averell Harriman who was the chairman (Jean Monnet and I were the two vice-chairmen) asked me to go and see him and said: "Well, what are we going to do about this, because Monnet is really being so obstructive that we will find it very difficult to work", and I said I thought probably it would sort itself out as we went on. And Averell said : "Well I think we ought to go and see Ike (who was then Supreme Commander in Europe). So we duly went off to SHAPE I think it was called then, and Averell put the point to Eisenhower - whom I hardly knew - who after making a few remarks, said something like "if you look into your hearts you will find that the solution lies there". I do not think we did find the solution in our hearts, but it did work out and Monnet did, reluctantly, work with us in doing the whole exercise which was - the terms of reference were something like "to reconcile the military requirements with the economic and political possibilities". I do remember I think that the Generals then were asking for either 82 or 86 divisions and it ultimately came out at 32 - or something, I cannot remember. But, I mean, it was that kind of exercise and I think was a well worthwhile exercise because it was perhaps the first effort, certainly in NATO, to see what each member of the alliance ought and could contribute to the common defence.

RM Perhaps it might have been better to have Marjolin there because he had been engaged in the franc's exercise in the EEC, do you think ?

ENP What - in the Wise Men exercise ?

RM Yes.

ENP I cannot remember - I rather think he was involved in it - you see, we had enormous staffs, there were a civilian and a military contribution from each of the three countries to study the whole range. The head of the British civilian one was Eric Roll and I have forgotten whether Marjolin was the head of the French one or not.

RM I suppose Monnet was thinking at that time much more about EDC than about NATO itself ?

ENP I think so, yes.

RM Although he was not of course involved in the negotiations he always blamed himself afterwards for not having got himself involved in it ...

ENP I think Monnet's attitude is summed up by his remark to me when he was writing his memoirs, that he had not mentioned the Wise Men exercise because it was "unimportant".

RM You say - you obviously met Monnet many many times over the years in private as well as public capacities - are there any particular memories that stick with you ?

ENP I used to see him very regularly long after I left government service Whenever he came to London - more often than not when he came to London - we used to dine together alone and discuss political things. Anything I may have said that sounds critical of Monnet is only critical of someone for whom I had the greatest admiration as I have rarely met someone who was so single-minded in the pursuit of a particular goal. When he died I was asked to say something on the BBC and I said that many people had tried to unify Europe by the force of arms unsuccessfully but here was

one man with the force of an idea who had perhaps got further towards this than anyone else. And I really do believe this. I think his singlemindedness - maddening as it could be - really made a major contribution to the history of Europe.

RM Of course, he roped you in, quite late in his life, for working with the man from Hoechst on the study of the problems of British entry into the Community - particularly on technology.

ENP Well, on technology. It was really on what could be done on research, development and technology. I am not sure how useful what we did was. It was quite an interesting exercise from my point of view.

RM Do you think from your inside knowledge from the British end that Monnet played a large part in any of the negotiations for British entry into the Community, including the unsuccessful Heath Negotiations ?

ENP I do not know. As you see I was not involved in any way in those negotiations. I know that he was anxious that the British should join the Community but on his terms and that meant a surrender of sovereignty of a kind that the British found very difficult to accept.

RM One last question, I don't want to keep you any longer, I know you have a lot to do. How do you think it is that Monnet made the mistake of having thought he had met you early in the war and been involved in aircraft production plans and so on ?

ENP I cannot think - I suppose that he was - you see, in 1940 he was in Washington in the British Purchasing Mission and the demands for materials and aircraft and everything would come from the Americans via the British Purchasing Mission and I suppose he may have been conscious.. I do not think at the time he certainly was conscious of me - I am sure he did not know me. But, later, looking back on it, knowing that I had been there and I eventually was the Chief Executive in the Ministry of Aircraft Production, I think he probably imagined that he had had dealings with me which he had not done. In the times that he mentioned in his book, of 1940/1941, I was very junior, certainly in 1940 I was an obscure temporary civil servant in the Ministry of Aircraft Production.

At a weekend in the country, when I was in the Treasury, he would come down and have lunch with us. In the coldest of weather he would say "Let's go for a walk" and every five steps we would stop in the most biting east wind and he would take one's arm and then start to tell one about something that one ought to be doing, and one would get colder and colder, but one could never persuade him to have these conversations sitting in a warm room in front of a log fire! My children were fascinated by him. They were very small then. One of my daughters called him "Mouser Monnet" I remember.

RM When he was young he certainly had a rather saturnine appearance, didn't he ? He had this long drooping moustache. I do not know whether he still had that when you saw him first ?

ENP I can't remember.. I can't remember. He is so much part of that part of my life. I am conscious of the fact that I really had a close association with him even though we did not see each other a great deal. I always felt he was one of those people - which everyone has in their lives, and there are not many of them - with whom you can pick up immediately what you were talking to them about the last time you had seen them. I had a great admiration for him and for his imagination. I have always wondered whether, if he had been a bit more flexible about the surrender of sovereignty thing, whether then the United Kingdom would not have joined a Community of that kind much earlier on than they did. But he was convinced that that was not what really was necessary in Europe. He really did mind about the surrender of sovereignty and that is what the British then - and now - find so difficult to accept.

RM I remember having lunch with him in 1975 after the referendum. It was partly to discuss his memoirs and how he did not want me to write a book about him until the memoirs were done, and he said to me : "You know, we were wrong in 1950 about the institutional shape that the Community was going to take". He really admitted that he was wrong, not about the surrender of sovereignty but about the idea that you could have a high authority, a sort of super-government of Europe. That he did acknowledge to have been a false track.

ENP I did not know that. I think that if it had been less formalised it would have been much easier for the British to join earlier on, long before you got the de Gaulle personal desire to keep the British out, but maybe you would not have had the kind of Community that he thought was what you needed in order to avoid Europe tearing itself to pieces in the internecine wars.

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Sèvres, le 26 juillet 1982

Mon cher ami,

Voici le commentaire que vous m'avez demandé sur ce que dit Lord Plowden dans son interview par Richard Mayne au sujet de l'attitude de Monnet lors de l'exercice des trois sages.

Monnet n'a jamais causé d'obstruction aux travaux des "Trois Sages". L'idée qu'il y avait désintérêt de sa part parcequ'il n'attendait pas que le NATO devienne un organe supra-national capable de résoudre les problèmes de l'Europe est purement fantaisiste. Bien au contraire il attachait une grande importance à la mission de civils chargés de ramener les ambitions extravagantes des généraux dans des limites compatibles avec nos ressources économiques. Il m'a chargé de le remplacer dans les innombrables réunions de la rue de la Faisanderie, car, à la différence de Harriman et de Plowden qui, à Paris, n'avaient rien d'autre à faire, Monnet devait poursuivre sa tâche rue de Martignac. Il m'a présenté dès le début à Harriman avec qui j'ai eu les relations les plus étroites et confiantes.

Monnet est venu avec moi à Lisbonne pour la conclusion des Travaux. Il a veillé particulièrement à ce que l'armée européenne, encore à l'état de projet, soit explicitement reconnue comme une contribution importante à la défense commune, et aussi à ce que la part de charges incombant à la France tienne compte de celles qu'elle assumait en Indochine.

Bien à vous


Etienne Hirsch

Monsieur François Fontaine