

Jean Monnet: the unifying force behind the birth of the European Union



Jean Monnet 1888 - 1979

The French political and economic adviser Jean Monnet dedicated himself to the cause of European integration. He was the inspiration behind the 'Schuman Plan', which foresaw the merger of west European heavy industry.

Monnet was from the Cognac region of France. When he left school at 16 he travelled internationally as a cognac dealer, later also as a banker. During both world wars he held high-level positions relating to the coordination of industrial production in France and the United Kingdom.

As a top advisor to the French government he was the main inspiration behind the famous 'Schuman Declaration' of 9 May 1950, which led to the creation of the European Coal and Steel Community and, as such, is considered to be the birth of the European Union. Between 1952 and 1955 he was the first president of its executive body.

Early life

Jean Omer Marie Gabriel Monnet was born on 9 November 1888 in the city of Cognac, France. After finishing school at 16, his father sent him to London to work for the family-run cognac trading business, having realised that his son's extraordinary interpersonal skills made him eminently suitable for a career in international business. And indeed, from this early experience he travelled the world as a respected and successful businessman.

First World War

His application to enrol in the military was turned down on health grounds in 1914. To be able to serve his country another way he contacted the French government with a proposal to better coordinate war supplies with Britain. This proposal met with approval and the French President made him an economic intermediary between France and its allies.

Having shown great professional aptitude during the war, at the age of 31 he was named Deputy Secretary General of the League of Nations upon its creation in 1919. When his father died in 1923 he returned to Cognac and successfully turned around the fortunes of the declining family business. Over the next few years, his experience in international finance also saw him become closely involved with the reorganisation of the national finances of various eastern European countries such as Romania and Poland, advising the Chinese government, assisting with the reorganisation of their railway network, and helping to set up a bank in San Francisco.

Second World War

At the beginning of the Second World War, Monnet again offered his services to his country and became President of a

Franco-British committee set up to coordinate the combining of the two countries' production capacities. He convinced the British and French leaders, Churchill and de Gaulle, to form a complete political union between the two countries to fight Nazism, but the plan failed at the last moment.

Monnet Plan

Thereafter Monnet offered his services to the British government who sent him to the United States to oversee the purchase of war supplies. Impressing American President Roosevelt, he soon became one of his trusted advisers and urged him to expand the production capacity for military equipment in the United States even before the US entered the war.

In 1943, Monnet became a member of the French Committee of National Liberation, the de facto French government in exile in Algiers. It was at this time that he first became explicit about his vision for a union of Europe to regain and retain peace. During a meeting of this committee on 5 August 1943, Monnet declared: "There will be no peace in Europe, if the states are reconstituted on the basis of national sovereignty... The countries of Europe are too small to guarantee their peoples the necessary prosperity and social development. The European states must constitute themselves into a federation..." In 1944 he took charge of the national modernisation and development plan aimed at reviving the French economy and rebuilding the country after the war.



Jean Monnet starts the first production of cast iron under the European Coal and Steel Community.

Schuman Declaration

After his plan was accepted and executed he began to realise however that European reconstruction and integration were not taking shape as quickly as he would have liked, and in the way he believed to be right. Under growing international tensions, Monnet recognised that it was time to take real steps towards European unity and he and his team began work on the concept of a European Community. On 9 May 1950, Robert Schuman, France's Minister of Foreign Affairs, delivered the so-called 'Schuman Declaration' in the name of the French government. This Declaration was instigated and prepared by Monnet and proposed to place all German-French production of coal and steel under one High Authority. The idea behind this was that if the production of these resources was shared by the two most powerful countries on the continent, it would prevent any future war. As the governments of Germany, Italy, the Netherlands, Belgium and Luxembourg replied favourably, this declaration laid the basis for the European Coal and Steel Community, the predecessor to the European Economic Community and subsequent European Union.

After the failure in 1954 to create a 'European Defence Community', Monnet founded the 'Action Committee for the United States of Europe'. This committee was set up to revive the spirit of European integration and became one of the main driving forces behind many of the developments in European integration such as the creation of the Common Market, the European Monetary System, the summits in the European Council and election to the European Parliament by universal suffrage.

Despite finishing formal education at the age of 16 and against all odds, Jean Monnet became a man of many roles: international businessman, financier, diplomat and statesman. However, he was never elected to any public office and therefore never had the formal political power to enforce his views. It was through his gift of argument and persuasion that he convinced European leaders to work towards common interests and to understand the benefits of cooperation.