

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

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So, what exactly is a ‘Eurobarometer’? It is an opinion poll undertaken in each country of the Community. At the time, this comprised nine countries — since we started in 1974 — and now there are 15. The survey was undertaken in each country by an institute, selected by tender, with one coordinating institute, since it was one and the same survey which was standardised. I shall come back to your question on how the questionnaire was drawn up. It was standardised mainly in French, English and German, and each institute could subsequently pose its own questions, if such-and-such a question required clarification. And the aim of the Eurobarometer was, once again, to introduce Europeans to one another, in such a way that Germans could learn what the French thought about the same issues — the same for the Luxembourgers, the Belgians, the Italians or the British, and at the same time, give the European institutions an exact as possible, as precise as possible, view of the attitudes of Europeans towards European integration and its various aspects.

So how did I set it up? I had been interested in opinion polls for a long time. We had already had one or two carried out at the ECSC in the six countries involved at the time, and I had thought a lot about the issues of social psychology, in particular, alongside a professor and friend from the University of Paris called Jean Stoetzel, who died a long time ago, and who founded the French market research institute and was a great specialist in the field. It was he who brought the initially American techniques to Europe in the immediate pre-war period and again after 1944–1945.

At the time, I was familiar with these techniques; I had already tried them out, and I thought that it would be useful to make them available to the European institutions. I had also had the opportunity to study in the United States at Ann Arbor, Michigan, with specialists in the field of surveys. There was already a long tradition, notably at this university in Michigan, of political and socio-political surveys in the United States. So all this prompted me to set up a programme, to draw up a budget, to have the programme and the budget approved by the Joint Information Office and to issue the first calls for tenders before starting work, in late 1973, on a pilot study, and then in the spring of 1974 on number one.

The questionnaires were drawn up by my staff and myself, bearing in mind the concerns that I knew the European institutions to have, in close cooperation with the institutes which knew the subject thoroughly and from every angle, and could tell me ‘This question is ambiguous; that question will not be understood; as for that question, it is rhetorical.’ In short, how to avoid all the traps and any bias. And, of course, once the questionnaire had been finalised technically, it could not be used until it had been shown to my successor, the Director-General of Information. It was a question of loyalty. Technically, I managed the Eurobarometer; there again, I tried to give it direction, but, since the costs of the Eurobarometer were charged to the budget of the Directorate-General of Information — a Eurobarometer is an expensive business to operate: nine countries, a thousand people surveyed per country, it costs a lot. If it is to be done properly, questionnaires of some length are required, and this has to be paid for — so the Commission, in this case the Directorate-General for Information, which has to pay up, and then, quite simply, for honesty’s sake, I would always submit the questionnaire to the Director-General of Information. I must say that he had the utmost confidence in me. I had a problem on just one occasion; not with the Information Directorate, but with the Director-General responsible for scientific matters. It was a long time ago; he has been dead for a long time. If I remember correctly, it was a question about nuclear energy or something like that, and the Director-General wanted to change it. I told him: ‘I am not prepared to ask that. I cannot accept a trick question or one that is biased.’ The question was not put. Now that is independence. As a civil servant, or rather a retired civil servant and special adviser, there exists a work ethic, and I would never have accepted that a question be put which would be open to criticism from the press, or later on in scientific circles. All the data from the surveys was filed in universities, so any researcher could have access to the original data, make his own analyses and check for mistakes or bias in the processing of the questions.

Those who were most interested, in the beginning, were the Members of Parliament. First of all, they started it off, because it was they who called, in several resolutions, for these periodic surveys to be made. The journalists became interested. In my time, as they say, I presented the results of the Eurobarometers personally, in a press conference. The Director-General of Information trusted me: ‘Present it.’ I tried to present it in a manner attractive for the journalists; the results were placed at their disposal, and the

newspapers made use of them. The Commission, the members of the Commission and the various departments became interested by and by. First of all, several directorates-general asked to have included in the Eurobarometer an additional section on science (I gave you an example just now); on agriculture, with an oversample of farmers; on the problems faced by young people, with an oversample of the younger members of the population; on attitudes to poverty. Many questionnaires have been added to the Eurobarometer; this goes to show that the directorates-general fixed a budget in order to obtain a special survey where I, of course, was to maintain ultimate control over the questionnaire by agreement with the directorates-general that financed the project.

In this way, the Eurobarometer developed step by step. Many questionnaires have been added. The Commission and successive Commissions took more and more interest in it. At first, they became interested because a reply to a question turned out to be awkward: 'Ah, you asked such-and-such a question!' But I can now say — given that I stopped working on it in 1992 — now the Eurobarometer has truly become an instrument of governance, as they say nowadays. And we are now at number 53; these days, surveys are even carried out in the applicant countries. No, it is a tool that, I believe, researchers trust. The number of universities that take an interest in it, of students that do tests on this or that aspect, for instance, on changing attitudes to the euro, to cite an example that is in the news. It is very interesting to see how, country by country, and I include the United Kingdom, how attitudes to the euro have changed with time. I have cited this example, but many others could be mentioned. The Eurobarometer has now become a tool that we can describe as practical, indispensable and incontestable.