

**Speech by H.E. Sylvie Bermann,  
French Ambassador to the United Kingdom,  
at the ceremony to award the insignia of the *Légion d'honneur*  
to Lord John Monks  
*French Residence, Thursday 3 December 2015***

Ladies and gentlemen,

I'm very pleased and honoured to welcome you to the French Residence tonight to award the *Légion d'honneur*, the highest distinction in France, to a distinguished friend of our country.

*Cher* Lord Monks, I know you are a family man, and it's lovely to see you here surrounded by your family, your friends, your former and present colleagues.

But before presenting you with the insignia, I'd like to retrace your remarkable career.

You are a Mancunian, with a Mancunian's typical sense of humour and passion for football, and you've been a lifelong supporter of Manchester United.

Unlike most such supporters, you grew up near the ground. Rumour has it that you once got a conference rescheduled to fly to Barcelona to see your beloved Red Devils.

But let's go back to your career. You started work at the TUC in 1969 after a short period as a management trainee.

Your meteoric rise (by TUC standards) saw you ascend to Head of the Organization and Industrial Relations Department in 1977, then Deputy General Secretary in 1987, then General Secretary in 1993 at the age of 44 (you grew a moustache in the late seventies to make yourself look older!).

You were at the heart of industrial relations under the Labour government during the Winter of Discontent in the nineteen-seventies. You saw out Mrs Thatcher and later welcomed in the even younger Tony Blair as Prime Minister, with whom you negotiated a national minimum wage and a ground-breaking trade union recognition law. You even saw trade union rights restored at Government Communications Headquarters so that trade unionists could once again spy on other trade unionists!

Your move to become the ETUC General Secretary in 2004 came as a surprise even to you! Arriving at a dinner the year before with other union leaders to discuss how to persuade someone to take on the job, you were shocked to find that you were the someone under discussion!

You presided over the ETUC negotiating a number of social partnerships with employers when you had little support from EU governments and the environment for trade unions was increasingly challenging.

You discovered a penchant for heading up large-scale demonstrations, calling far more as ETUC General Secretary than you had ever been willing to as TUC leader.

But when it came to industrial dialogue, you always distinguished yourself by your spirit of consensus.

In 2010, you eventually agreed to join the House of Lords as Baron Monks of Blackley. Few of your fellow European trade union leaders knew that the UK term “trade union baron” could have two possible meanings! You are a welcome pro-European voice in the House.

You are definitely a Francophile. At the ETUC you had French conversation lessons every week, and you practised the language in your speeches to congresses of your French affiliates. As we have lots of them, you had lots of practice!

You have met quite a number of French political leaders from Chirac onwards. You worked closely with French ministers of labour, foreign affairs and European affairs.

Xavier Bertrand, when he was labour minister, invited you to the ministry gardens to negotiate the European Works Council revision and offered tea on the lawn, probably as a sop to the Brit – who asked for coffee instead!

You shared a platform at the Cirque d'Hiver with François Hollande during the ill-fated EU constitutional referendum campaign in 2005, and you hope you've now been forgiven for the result!

You warned Mme Lagarde back in 2008 that her economic policy would lead to similar consequences as those of the 1918 reparations forced on Germany. She said, “*Monsieur Monks, vous exagérez.*” But the Greeks might have picked up on the idea!

I can say today that you are also a friend of France because you are a true European. You contributed, with your good friend Jacques Delors, to bringing the TUC – and the UK as a whole – on board the European project.

You definitely played a key role during the French EU presidency in 2008, and it was also thanks to you that two very important directives were finally adopted (on equal treatment of temporary agency workers and the European Works Council Directive).

Finally, together with Alan Johnson, you're now playing a key role in the new “in campaign”, promoting the social Europe which has and will always protect all workers.

*Cher Lord Monks*, for all these reasons, for your outstanding qualities and your commitment to France and Europe, the French Republic wanted to express its full gratitude to you today by awarding you the highest distinction.

Lord Monks, *au nom du Président de la République et en vertu des pouvoirs qui nous sont conférés, nous vous faisons chevalier de l'ordre national de la Légion d'honneur.*