

Press conference given by Michel Jobert (Washington, 13 February 1974)

Caption: On 13 February 1974, at the close of the Washington Energy Conference, Michel Jobert, French Foreign Minister, reveals his doubts about the effectiveness of measures proposed by the Conference to alleviate the effects of the world oil crisis.

Source: La politique étrangère de la France. Textes et documents. dir. de publ. Ministère des Affaires étrangères. 1er semestre 1974-Novembre 1974. Paris: La Documentation Française. "Conférence de presse de M. Jobert, ministre des Affaires étrangères à Washington, 13 février 1974", p. 90-93.

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Press conference given in Washington by Michel Jobert, Minister of Foreign Affairs

13 February 1974

Q. — Has France adopted the communiqué with or without reservations?

A. — As you are aware, we have just adopted a communiqué on a certain number of points. France has not, a point that was already clear to you as a well-informed observer, given its agreement. This was only to be expected, given the conditions in which the Conference was convened and preparations made for it and also given the time when it took place.

You will have the full story at 3 o'clock. I believe that the communiqué will be published at 3 o'clock. What I can say to you, very briefly, is that many points had our backing but that we were unable to agree to a programme of action which has not, in our estimation, been defined with sufficient clarity. I did not manage to find out whether the proposed programme of action would be consistent with what the OECD has been doing to date, in which case I would readily have given it my endorsement, or whether it strayed into other areas — about which I have received no explanation, nor even an indication of the subject headings.

Then there is a paragraph dealing with monetary issues. I did not wish to endorse the section in that passage which, to my mind, is simply detail and which reiterates decisions taken in Rome by the Group of Twenty, decisions which were taken on 18 January, virtually yesterday in other words, and which the communiqué as drafted restated, significantly less well. There is no fundamental disagreement there, rather a difference of judgement as to what seems opportune.

And this brings us to what has been viewed here as the main course and which, for my part, I regard as barely a starter. When I came here, I thought that we were at least going to talk about energy, although I have to admit to some slight misgivings, and I did wonder whether in fact we would be talking politics some or even most of the time. In the days leading up to the Conference, I had my work cut out persuading my colleagues that politics was what was behind all this. Apparently, making that point was not good form. Anyway, politics is what we talked about in a big way, and politics is, in a sense, what produced this starter about which I was speaking a moment ago, or should I say this 'zakuska', which amounts essentially to a procedural concern.

Does this Washington Conference offer some kind of way forward? Can some follow-up be expected by the French Government? This would certainly have been possible if the Conference had stressed certain fundamental concerns, with a commitment from the participants to active forms of solidarity; it ought thus to have been perfectly possible to decide to impart this resolve to a number of organisations which already exist and which ask for nothing more than to get down to work. These organisations offer, to my way of thinking, an essential advantage, which is that they do not behave, and never have behaved, like a club. I am referring, for example, to the OECD, the International Monetary Fund and the United Nations. We are not talking here about clubs. We are talking about a highly developed form of international cooperation. The process having acquired, as the Conference progressed, a political hue, it has also, to my mind, been diverted onto another track. The focus has rather been on putting together a group, one for which all sorts of names have been thought up over the last three days, a sort of chameleon which has, in the end, proved to be the same animal, and the idea is for the group to prolong this gathering of 13 industrialised consumer and producer countries and to seek to refine its resolutions and policies at one or more international conferences. It would, as we see it, have been better to have begun by convening a large international meeting and only then to have proceeded to this more restricted kind of gathering, as a means of applying the decisions or guidelines emerging from an international conference. The fact that we have submitted a proposal tending towards the convening of an international conference on energy underlines our conviction that this is the right approach. Indeed, you will see from certain lines in the communiqué that reference is made, vaguely enough I have to admit, to this and to another proposal.

None of this strikes me as particularly dramatic. It seems to me that there were simply, at a given moment, differing views as to form, as to the future. What I am saying is that there was no fundamental disagreement,

but time and circumstance play their part; they have to be taken into account. In the words of a French song, that does not rule out affection, and heaven only knows how smooth the dealings are between your Foreign Minister and myself. I believe, quite simply, that too little information was provided in advance and that, if more had been given, the Washington Conference would probably have taken a different form and attitudes on all sides would have been somewhat different.

Q. — Do you mean that, if another conference that did not include the producer countries were to be convened, France would not attend?

R. — The future belongs to those who hope. Some people hope there will be conferences organised in one way, we think there should be conferences organised in another way. We shall just have to see which will enjoy first call on our logical, and at times irritating, way of thinking. Indeed, it was one of the variants proposed by France for the paragraph on procedures that generated so much discussion. Forgive me for thinking that it was the right solution.

Q. — What do you think about the way the EEC conducted itself during the Conference?

R. — All your questions begin with ‘what do you think?’ We have to think, think, think all the time. What I think about its conduct is that the European Economic Community agreed on a mandate. I believe, for my part, that I fully abided by that mandate. The fact is that, here in Washington, imagination has rather taken command. Being imaginative is pleasant enough, but you have to be realistic, too. I feel sure that we shall all be more realistic tomorrow. The Community is something which now has a past and which will have a future. So, we shall have plenty of time to consider what lessons should be learned from this meeting. What I can say, at all events, is that the European Economic Community, which apparently came here to deal with technical issues relating to energy — issues entirely within its remit and of genuine concern to it — found itself faced, as I expected, with a political problem. Let me remind you that the European Economic Community is an economic entity. It is not yet an international political institution. This may explain the flights of fancy.

Q. — When you say that you have honoured your commitments, does that mean the other European countries failed to honour theirs?

A. — International relations are a mix of resolve and indulgence, and, in my taking of your questions today, my determination has, I think, been clear. But if I were to answer you on the last point, I would have to be a little unkind, so I prefer not to answer. Once again, I consider, for my part, that I have kept strictly to the mandate defined in Brussels and, as I have already indicated, and I believe I was quite clear on this point, the Community, having come up against an issue that was more political than economic, reacted with a certain amount of fancy. I believe that I even said to you that imagination had taken command.

Q. — How do things stand with your plan for a Euro-Arab Conference?

A. — When you say ‘your plan’, I assume that you are referring to the nine Member States of the Community? Am I right? I rather think I am. The plan to which you refer ought to have been considered by my colleagues and myself in Bonn tomorrow. But, as the Conference fell a day behind schedule, we thought it perhaps wiser to wait a few days. And this matter will probably be considered at our next political cooperation meeting in Bonn.

Q. — How, in your view, has this Conference affected European unity, meaning the unity of the ‘Nine’?

A. — I more or less dealt with that point a few moments ago, although without specifying that I was responding to just that type of question, but my conclusion should be clear from what I said. I do not believe that this Conference will substantially affect the future of the EEC. With the passing of time, things all fall into place. Away from the spotlights.

Q. — Do you think the oil-producing countries’ worries about this Conference are justified?

A. — Listen, my remit is limited to the concern, even bafflement which the French Government may feel in this matter. For the rest, I read the papers, the declarations made in this or that country. And I do have the impression that a number of governments were either worried or suspicious. In the course of two tours of the Middle East, I also registered the sort of disquiet to which you refer or, should I say, a questioning that showed little sign of being well disposed, in fact none at all.

Q. — You say that you have kept to the Brussels mandate. But did not that mandate include provisions allowing for the creation of working groups?

A. — I can answer that one straightaway. Let me put it like this: manifestly, you are in rather the same position as Mr Schmidt, the German Finance Minister, who had not had the privilege of following our discussions in Brussels on which our mandate was then based. If he, or you, had been there, you would have been in no doubt whatever that I had had it specified that those groups should be groups dealing with technical issues and that there was no question of their serving as an extension of the present Conference. So the situation is perfectly clear.

Q. — Do you think that the oil supply situation will improve as a result of the Conference?

R. — Frankly, such an outcome does not strike me as blindingly obvious. If it were, I should not be able to look you in the eye at this moment.

Q. — Why did you sabotage the Conference?

A. — We did not sabotage the Conference at all. In any event, sabotage, as you know, often implies secrecy. The fact is, however, that, from the moment when the Conference was convened by the American Administration, I and the French Government were at pains to point out that the whole initiative had got off to a shaky start, that it left us with the most serious misgivings and that we did not really understand what it was about. Was it, as they say, chalk or cheese, or perhaps a bit of both? Well, the days went by, and we came to see that, yes, it was some sort of hybrid which may well prove short-lived, as often happens where the right mix has not been found.

Q. — Do you think that you might as well have stayed in Paris rather than travelling to this Conference?

A. — The question is certainly worth asking, but, basically, during my three days here, I found out more about the basic issues, well, not that much more about the basic issues to be honest, and the behaviour of the participants at this Conference and indeed my own conduct were certainly instructive. And, after all, since the French Government had received an invitation, it had been my hope, coming here with my Community colleagues and in agreement with them, to accompany them as far as I felt that I could. That is what I did. I accompanied them as far as I felt I could. So I am happy with that.

Q. — What concessions did you make?

A. — I made that clear at the start of this press conference. You ask me what concessions we made? I do not believe that I made very many.

Q. — Did not your behaviour consist simply of striking poses that would stand you in good stead with the Arabs?

A. — Is that your assessment, sir? Yes? Then allow me to tell you that you are mistaken, you and many others who profess that well-aided view. France is a country which has its national interests and, whether you like it or not, it defends them as best it can. And that has nothing to do with striking an attitude. That is my answer.