

'The great turning point' from Le Figaro (14 December 1973)


Caption: On 14 December 1973, against a background of debates over the European identity, the French daily newspaper Le Figaro summarises the issues raised at the Copenhagen European Summit.

Source: Le Figaro. 14.12.1973. Paris: Le Figaro. "Le grand tournant", auteur:Massip, Roger.

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URL:
http://www.cvce.eu/obj/the_great_turning_point_from_le_figaro_14_december_1973-en-31d67032-5631-4a52-a836-6754e68ee0ae.html

Last updated: 05/07/2016



The great turning point

Like previous European summit meetings, today's European Conference in Copenhagen is the outcome of a French initiative.

But, this time, the undertaking is on a grander scale than in 1969 (The Hague) or 1972 (Paris). France has diagnosed a very serious illness and is determined to find a cure.

The illness is the creeping paralysis of the Brussels institutions that govern the life of the Community of Nine. While the Council of Ministers meets periodically in the Belgian capital at various levels (foreign affairs, finance, agriculture, and so on), it has difficulty in reaching agreement. Unable to assume their responsibilities, the Ministers have a convenient let-out: the discussions are put off to a later date. The experts, with their battery of technical objections, are of little help. As postponement follows postponement, Europe marks time. This state of affairs is recognised and deplored by all concerned, and Georges Pompidou is to be congratulated for acknowledging it publicly and proposing a solution.

The principle of the remedy is very simple. In the final analysis, the will of the peoples of the Member States is vested in the Heads of State or Government. The democratic process leading to their election or appointment gives them an unchallengeable right of decision. When they meet henceforth 'by themselves', in accordance with the procedure proposed by France, they will constitute a genuine European authority capable of compelling the bodies in Brussels to implement the measures that they discuss and determine.

Some of our partners are worried that the Brussels institutions will ultimately be neutralised by the intervention of the Heads of State or Government. But the time for such squabbling is over. What Europe needs now is efficient structures that enable it to move forward. That is the purpose of the French initiative.

When Mr Pompidou referred, in last September's press conference, to what was to become a firm proposal a month later, he, like everybody else, had no idea that the fourth Israeli-Arab war was imminent or that the policy of the oil-producing states of the Middle East would cause an extremely serious energy crisis. Clearly, the reform on the Copenhagen agenda is made even more urgent by the fact that Europe has been deliberately kept out of the ceasefire preparations and by the threat to our industrial societies from the oil crisis.

Many of our partners therefore believe that the Conference over the next two days must do more than establish procedural structures. From the outset, it must assert European solidarity in the face of the crisis threatening us all.

Whether we like it or not, the energy issue will dominate the deliberations. How could it be otherwise? The Foreign Ministers of six Arab states, notably those of the Emirates, the Maghreb countries and Saudi Arabia, are expected in Copenhagen on Friday morning. Everything suggests that the representatives of those countries wish to take up immediately Michel Jobert's proposal to establish economic links of an interdependent nature between the Community and the oil-exporting countries seeking aid for industrialisation.

This sudden decision on the part of the Arab states places Europe in an entirely new situation: to refuse to talk to the Arabs who come to Copenhagen would be ridiculous, since we want to open discussions with them. But, if we agree to do so, such talks can take place only at the level of the Foreign Ministers of the European and Arab states.

So what we might see in Copenhagen are two parallel conferences, one of which — a meeting of Ministers — is likely to attract much more attention than the deliberations of the Heads of State or Government.

The proceedings of the Copenhagen summit are likely to be further complicated by Henry Kissinger's latest proposal, made in London on Wednesday. It would be unfortunate if some of our partners saw the US Secretary of State's offer, which reflects the same concerns as those of the European countries, as a

reason for further postponement of action at Community level.

The Community has to act now, even if it means the United States joining in at a later stage. Beyond any doubt, the Copenhagen Conference will be accounted a success only if the Nine reach agreement and speak to the Arab countries with a single voice.

If the Nine fail to present a common front to the oil-producing countries of the Middle East, they will be unlikely to be more successful in asserting their own prerogatives vis-à-vis the United States, at a time when they are seeking to redefine the nature of the links between Europe and America.

A joint approach, highly desirable in view of the energy crisis, should involve the adoption of identical measures in the nine countries, even if they are not all similarly affected. Such measures would undoubtedly have greater credibility than action taken by each country separately. They would also have an exemplary effect on all those who continue to take a cynical view of European integration.

In other words, it would be hard to understand the Community failing to act, given the problems facing each of its Member States. The fact that the Member States' markets are interdependent means that the common interest must take precedence over national concerns. Otherwise, we should have to accept that European union is a figment of the imagination and that the much-talked-about European identity is simply a topic for pointless discussion.

Roger Massip