

Interview with Michel Jobert (1 April 1974)

Caption: On 1 April 1974, Michel Jobert, French Foreign Minister, contests the arguments put forward by his British counterpart, James Callaghan, to justify the request for renegotiation of the conditions for the United Kingdom's accession to the European Communities.

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Interview with Mr Michel Jobert on the occasion of the political consultation meeting between the European Foreign Affairs Ministers in Luxembourg (1 April 1974)

We have just listened with great interest to the statement by the Foreign Secretary. Mr Callaghan has set out for us the broad lines of his government's policy on Europe. I should like to respond immediately with the following few remarks.

A treaty was signed between the original members of the Community and three countries which had applied to join the Communities in accordance with the procedure provided for in those treaties concerned and in line with the guidelines that had been defined by common accord.

The negotiations leading up to conclusion of the treaty lasted many months and gave each of the parties concerned every opportunity to express its views to the full, and this applies equally to the countries that made up the Member States of the Community of Six and to the acceding countries. The negotiations were conducted with a view to maintaining the Community patrimony and the opportunities for proceeding with European integration.

The negotiations were concerned essentially, one might even say solely, with enabling the acceding countries to adapt progressively to a system, compliance with which implied significant changes to the rules governing their domestic economic activity and their external economic relations. The aim was not, then, for the Community to adapt to the customs of the acceding countries but rather for those customs to be brought into line with Community rules.

That is the spirit in which the accession negotiations were conducted. The various countries involved took part in those negotiations freely, and full account was taken of the particular circumstances in which they found themselves at the outset. There can be no doubt on that point. Concerning Great Britain in particular, that is how the negotiations were understood by the successive governments which sought their country's accession to the Community. I could cite the various declarations that were made to that effect over a lengthy period, but let us simply say since 1967, when Mr Wilson was already at the head of the British Government.

I would like to think that the British Government is still aware of that situation. However, Mr Callaghan's statements to the House of Commons on 19 March and those he has just made to us lead me to wonder whether some measure of misunderstanding has not crept in.

Mr Callaghan has just told us that he is not yet in a position to submit detailed proposals, because the question of the impact of Community policies on the British economy is currently undergoing a comprehensive review, and that we shall have to wait until the findings of that review are known. But Mr Callaghan tells us, at the same time, that he will be submitting proposals to us on the changes that he considers necessary if Great Britain is to remain a member of the Community and play a full part in the development of European cooperation. He is, in a sense, inviting us to take the first step and say at the outset what price we would be willing to pay to keep Great Britain in the Common Market. We agreed to pay a fair price for its accession. We do not see the need to pay a supplement for it to stay in.

Surely that would be to turn the problem on its head? To my mind, it is up to the British Government to tell us what it wants: to keep its country in the Community or to take it out. That is a fundamental question, one to which Mr Callaghan has not given an answer. For our part, we certainly wish Great Britain to stay in the Community, but that would have to mean that it intends abiding by its rules. This brings me to another question: what specific proposals does the British Government wish to make? We have received half an answer: the British Government wishes to secure changes in four areas. What Mr Callaghan has just said about those changes does not provide us with much enlightenment as to the extent of the demands which the British Government will be making at the end of the review to which he just referred.

Mr Callaghan has not yet said precisely what his demands will entail, but he has already given us to understand that he is looking for an assurance that the Community rules as currently interpreted will not

prevent the British Government from taking the necessary measures to deal with its regional, industrial and fiscal problems and to overcome the problems posed by inflation in Great Britain. He refers to the need for the British Government to provide quick and effective assistance on certain regional fronts. To be frank, I am not entirely clear about what the statements concerned are supposed to mean. I do not, at this stage, wish to play guessing games or ask Mr Callaghan questions which he says he would, for the time being, be unable to answer. I shall simply observe that the first three headings which, it has to be admitted, we were rather expecting, have now been joined by a somewhat unexpected fourth, whose scope seems to be as general as it is vague.

Mr Callaghan goes on to tell us that, once his government has submitted detailed proposals in these four areas, a broad debate will have to be held, and this will have to be followed by an agreement on the arrangements for considering the proposals. Only on completion of that procedure will the British Government decide whether it wishes to apply for the revision of provisions of the Treaty. Mr Callaghan has given us to understand that such requests would be made if it became clear that this was the only way of safeguarding the essential interests of Great Britain or if the British Government concluded that Community rules as currently interpreted restricted its ability to pursue effective regional, industrial and fiscal policies that would help to put the British economy back on its feet.

Mr Callaghan tells us, lastly, that, throughout this procedure, the British Government will continue to take part in Community activities and will abide by Community procedures; it will, however, reserve the right not to proceed further towards integration if to do so would prejudice the outcome of the negotiations.

I have to say that addressing the issues in this way seems to me very dangerous and, let it be said from the outset, quite unacceptable.

If we were to endorse the notion that any Member State might seek a revision of the Treaty whenever it changes government and carries out a review of its interests, how could we then object to the idea that any government may likewise seek a revision where it considers, on reflection, that proper account is not being taken of its domestic or external national interests? For our part, we consider, and will continue to do so until we are convinced otherwise, that a community is by definition a community of rights and obligations and that compliance with common rules and the pursuit of the common good must prevail over the pursuit of individual interests. I hope that the Council will endorse this interpretation. I would add that one of the most enduring lessons of our Community experience has been that, in pursuing the common good, each member has ultimately reaped lasting benefits far outweighing any temporary drawbacks.

I would also say this: we have not undertaken, nor would it be proper for us to undertake, an analysis of the special interests of Great Britain and draw particular conclusions. That is clearly a matter for the British Government. And it is for the British Government, therefore, to give us a very clear and comprehensive account of the conclusions that it has drawn from its own assessment. Since that assessment has not yet been completed, which is entirely understandable, we shall wait until it has been completed and until we know exactly what conclusions the British Government intends to draw. We cannot act in its stead: that would be to engage in British domestic politics. That is quite clearly the very last thing we would wish, or indeed be able, to do.

Finally, when Mr Callaghan has conveyed to us, once and for all, his government's precise demands, there will be two things for us to do.

The first will be to tell him, in a spirit of genuine friendship but very clearly, what would be unacceptable since it would imply a revision of the Treaty. We are, of course, aware that a procedure exists for revising Treaty provisions, but that procedure is dependent on unanimous voting and also calls for parliamentary ratification; generally speaking, it implies the conclusion of a new treaty. We are talking, therefore, about a formal procedure which it would be unwise to seek to apply in response to operational difficulties. If such a procedure were indeed to be used to secure a substantial revision of the Treaty provisions, a general renegotiation could then be expected, during which every Member State would have claims to stake and would register its own particular complaints. Is that what we want? The answer is, of course, no. But we

have to say so clearly and say so now. The idea must not be allowed to gain credence that Great Britain can remain part of the Common Market on conditions that are — and here I quote the words spoken by Mr Hattersley on 29 March in Edinburgh — ‘fundamentally different from those negotiated three years ago.’

The second thing that we shall have to say to Mr Callaghan concerns British demands in the area of secondary legislation, demands to do with adjusting and developing the way in which the common market operates. We shall have to remind him that these matters will have to be discussed in accordance with the usual procedure, namely consideration by the Committee of Permanent Representatives and decision by the Council. I can see no reason whatsoever for creating a new procedure to do this, whether it be to set up working groups or convene special meetings of the Council. What I can see are all the disadvantages of introducing a special procedure, since our own Community endeavours would then be delayed and Community action put on hold until such time as British difficulties and uncertainties were overcome.

It would, in my view, be ill-advised to do anything other than follow our usual procedures in dealing with those difficulties and uncertainties, the procedures we all adopt when there are particular problems that we wish to address. Any other solution would result in some kind of ongoing negotiation alongside our normal business; in other words, it would paralyse our institutions for all practical purposes.

I shall conclude on a more general point: the Community is a living organism whose role cannot be arbitrarily limited to that of managing the customs union and administering existing policies. The Conference of Heads of State or Government has mapped out broad directions for the Community, and these are in line with those accepted, advisedly let me add, by the applicant countries from the very start of the accession negotiations. To disregard that guidance would be to twist the very sense of European integration, to turn back, in short to renege on our commitments and forsake our clearly stated intention.

I cannot, then, subscribe to the idea that all progress on common policies should be dependent on the outcome of what the British Government calls the ‘renegotiation’ of the terms of accession, about which I have already spoken. An exercise of this kind would be unacceptable if it were to mean calling into question, even theoretically, the broad lines of our common endeavour; I could not, for my part at least, consider going along with such a project.