

EXCURSUS 3

Marcel Berlins on THE PLATITUDES OF SUMMITRY

Mrs. Thatcher had gone to great lengths to keep hopes subdued, so it was not difficult for her to count the June summit of world leaders a success. How much of practical effect was achieved, however, depends on one's view of summits. It is no doubt useful for the heads of the seven major industrial nations to spend time together discussing the world's and their own problems. But a two-day getting-to-know-you chat hardly justifies the jamboree that summits have now become. The London event cost some \$4 million and drew more than three thousand newsmen to pick up the few scraps available.

The nature of such conferences scarcely allows for anything more concrete. The assembled leaders do not constitute a decision-making authority. They have no executive power. Their conclusions may have moral force in the short term but little practical consequence. How much is mere words and how much a blueprint for action depends largely on the measure of real agreement that lies behind the bland phrases of the least-common-denominator communiqué (or series of communiqués, as is now the fashion) issued at the end of the meeting.

Summitry is further diluted by the need of each leader to play to his home constituency. For President Reagan, the London get-together was being regarded as little more than the English leg of his presidential campaign, following the Irish and Normandy ones. Prime Minister Trudeau, about to relinquish national office but determined to avoid a lame-duck exit, adopted a combatively conciliatory line on relations with the Soviet Union. President Mitterrand, the only socialist leader, reluctantly compelled by France's own difficulties to adopt the economic philosophies of his colleagues, fought his corner by championing the cause of the debt-burdened countries of the developing world. Mrs. Thatcher, apart from her understandable desire to prove a good hostess, was anxious to get a firm declaration supporting action against state-supported terrorism, following the murder of an English policewoman at the hands of a still-unidentified Libyan operating from his country's diplomatically protected embassy. She was disappointed by the relatively anodyne statement that did emerge.

It was in many ways a curious conference. Billed and conceived as an *economic* summit, the world's leaders and their advisors spent much of their time talking about non-economic subjects. The Iran-Iraq war was discussed and the unsurprising conclusion reached that they would prefer it to stop. A call for the Soviet Union to return to the nuclear arms talks table—hardly new—has already received the predictable brush-off from its recipient. And even more irrelevant to the ostensible purpose of the conference was the discussion, often animated, about a lengthy, flaccid, and unnecessary "statement of democratic values." No one seemed clear about its purpose or at whom it was aimed; there was rather more agreement about its vapidty.

With the political platitudes out of the way, there was some expectation that the summiteers would get down to

the real business of the meeting. The trouble was that the chiefs couldn't quite agree on what the main issue was. There was no doubt that for the Europeans (Mrs. Thatcher the least active among them) the key topic was the United States budget deficit, the resultant high interest rates, and the effect of U.S. monetary policy on the crisis of Third World indebtedness. But President Reagan and his economic team continued to insist that the deficit and high interest rates were not all that closely linked. To the disappointment of the Europeans, and to the surprise of most observers, the final economic communiqué made no direct mention of America's particular role in the present crisis. As one sour French official remarked: "We didn't put President Reagan in the dock, but we think he should at least have given evidence as a witness."

The communiqué did, however, offer a few crumbs to the poor debtor nations of the world. Here, for the first time, was official recognition by the rich nations that the debtor nations could not continue indefinitely down the austerity path, in an attempt to repay the ever-more-burdensome interest on their debts, without incurring grave political and social consequences (including—though this was not stated—mass starvation and/or revolution). Those countries which had obviously tried hard to meet their international obligations and put their house in order but had found the task beyond reach would be rewarded by being allowed extended rescheduling terms. The communiqué went on to make other encouraging noises for the benefit of the Third World—calling, for instance, for greater investment there by the industrialized countries and suggesting that stable long-term arrangements be substituted for the short-term bank lending which had proved so disastrous.

Empty words or an important development in the attitude of the rich toward the poor? President Mitterrand certainly felt that the communiqué fell far short of what the developing world had the right to expect.

For the rest, it was the old litany: We are moving out of recession...must keep inflation and interest rates down...create jobs...encourage trade liberalization...discourage protectionism...reform the international monetary system. The leaders may have taken some comfort in the notion that nothing had gone so wrong since last year as to require writing a new sense of urgency into the comforting old formula. It is doubtful that the countries of the Third World were likewise reassured.

Upon leaving London, President Reagan claimed that the summit had demonstrated the unity of the industrialized nations. The fact is that once again it had shown the capacity of statesmen to paper over their differences by the skillful use of diplomatic language. What unity exists among the seven is based on bonds of economics, politics, and culture. There is no need for a summit to affirm such bonds—which are, in any case, in the interests of all parties. Where there is disunity, it will not suddenly disappear because a number of leaders, many of whom see each other regularly anyway, gather in the sunshine of a London June.

Marcel Berlins, formerly of The Times, London, is now a freelance journalist and broadcaster.

* * *