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Short-term thinking in Venice

THERE WAS enthusiasm as well as deliberate informality about the first in the present series of economic summits of leading Western nations, which was held in the cramped castle at Rambouillet in November 1975 at the invitation of President Giscard d'Estaing of France. In his recent memoirs, *Time and Chance*, the former Prime Minister Sir James Callaghan paints a disarming picture of the French foreign minister working on urgent telegrams at a table in a busy corridor while officials from the British delegation struggled in Napoleon's bathroom.

Each Head of Government was expected to give "a completely candid assessment of the economic prospects of his own country" followed by "an examination of future world difficulties as a whole", while the press was kept many miles away in Paris, so the debilitating convention of political posturing and instant but selective briefing at summits was held to a minimum. Even so, as Sir James, who is an enthusiast for the process, was forced to admit: "It could not be claimed that much was decided at Rambouillet." Instead he lists the virtues of the meeting as education, understanding and a conviction that the problems of recession and unemployment could not be handled in isolation. A belief emerged, he suggests, that "the health of the major industrial nations depended on a co-ordinated strategy".

It was demonstrated in Venice, on a much

larger and more formal stage, that this worthy belief still survives — as it surely must in an era of managed exchange rates. But it has become, in part, an incantation to be uttered by the electioneering politician. A gathering of leaders including lame ducks and those fighting election campaigns is not inclined to think long-term. Moreover, many of those involved in the early economic summits, such men as Giscard, Schmidt, Wilson, Callaghan, Carter even, were intellectually interested in the making of policy.

In spite of the economic vicissitudes of the past decade, the current crop of Western leaders have other preoccupations. Apart from the Gulf crisis, terrorism and the meaning of changes in Russia, Aids, drug abuse, the financial crisis at the United Nations and obstacles to "the peace and tranquillity of South East Asia", as well as the possibility that the next Olympic Games "may create a climate favourable to the development of a more open dialogue" between the two Koreas, all figured in official statements. Neil Kinnock was, therefore, not being unduly harsh when he described Mrs Thatcher's flying visit to Venice as providing time for little more than "a sandwich, a photo-session and a sermon". But Mrs Thatcher, for her part, was not being over-cynical. That brief visit was as much a reflection of the importance of the occasion as it was a reflection of the pressure of events at home.