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SUMMARY

LIKELY POLITICAL CONSEQUENCES OF THE FRENCH PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION

1. This despatch considers some of the political variants which might flow from different possible election results. The key question after the election will be whether the new President can depend on a reliable majority in the National Assembly. The pre-eminence of the President in the 5th Republic stems as much from the existence of such a majority as from the powers vested in him by the Constitution (paragraph 1 and 2).

2. M. Giscard, if re-elected, does not intend to bring forward the elections to the Legislature due at the latest in 1983. In the interval, his principal objective will be to erode RPR strength and solidarity and strengthen his own UDF (paragraph 3).

3. A strong showing by M. Giscard on both rounds of the election would widen his scope for taking initiatives to damage the RPR and to make overtures to the moderate left (paragraph 4 and 5). His freedom of manoeuvre would be much reduced if, as seems more probable, he managed only to scrape home on both rounds (paragraph 6). There would be many variants between these two scenarios (paragraph 7).

/4. M. Mitterrand

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4. M. Mitterrand, if elected, would hold early elections for a new National Assembly. He would want to appoint an interim government without communist participation and adopt various new-looking measures by decree.

M. Barre could refuse to resign, but would probably not do so (paragraph 8). Even if the Socialist Party made gains in the elections to the National Assembly, it would be difficult for M. Mitterrand to find a stable majority in the Assembly. The PCF would be unhelpful (paragraph 9).

5. Conflict between the President and the National Assembly would change the character of the Fifth Republic (paragraph 10).

BRITISH EMBASSY,
PARIS.

6 April 1981

The Rt Hon The Lord Carrington KCMG MC
Secretary of State for Foreign
and Commonwealth Affairs
Foreign and Commonwealth Office
London SW1

My Lord

LIKELY POLITICAL CONSEQUENCES OF THE
FRENCH PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION

1. In a separate despatch, I have once again and probably for the last time before the Presidential election reviewed the elements which are likely to determine the outcome of the election. In this despatch, I propose to sketch briefly some of the political variants which could be triggered by different possible election results.
2. So far the Fifth Republic has always had a strong President. It is usually assumed that the pre-eminence of the President over the Prime Minister, the Government and National Assembly stems from the power vested in him by the Constitution. In fact, the Constitution of the Fifth Republic ensures that a President with a reliable majority in the National Assembly is strong, and it helps a President to assemble a majority which would not otherwise spontaneously exist; but it probably would not enable a President to be strong if for any reason he failed to command a majority in the National Assembly. Since the Fifth Republic was created the French electorate has elected Presidents and Assemblies who have been mutually compatible. The question /which



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which lies beyond the Presidential election is whether at that time there will be a new element in the political game, viz: a majority in the National Assembly which would be prepared at a time of its choosing to censure and bring down the Government.

3. M. Giscard has already announced that, if he is re-elected, elections to the Legislature will not be held before the normal term in 1983. This must mean that, in the intervening period, his principal objective would be to strengthen his own UDF in relation to the Gaullist RPR, so that after 1983 the UDF and not the RPR would be the dominant group in the majority. His ability to do this would depend on his own performance in the Presidential election. The stronger M. Giscard's showing in the two rounds of the Presidential election, the greater his scope will be for taking initiatives that would damage the RPR and draw forces to the UDF.

4. If M. Giscard does really well in both rounds of the election, which on present form looks unlikely, he should have little difficulty in compelling the RPR in the National Assembly to support him. As a first step towards bringing the RPR to heel, M. Giscard has said that he would instruct his new Government under an optional and infrequently used Article of the Constitution to seek a vote of confidence in the Assembly. Thereafter, he would probably make a determined bid to break the RPR or to fragment it before the 1983 electoral /dateline.

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dateline. In the aftermath of a substantial victory by M. Giscard, some Gaullist deputies anxious to climb on the Giscardian bandwagon might desert the RPR to join the UDF. Others, for example the supporters of M. Debré, could be tempted to form their own parliamentary group separate from the RPR in the hope of securing UDF benevolence for their candidatures in 1983. M. Giscard would be in a position to encourage the break-up of the RPR by offering Ministerial posts not just to Gaullists hostile to M. Chirac as hitherto but to those in the mainstream of the RPR. The pursuit of a strong nationalist policy abroad would be a further means of luring Gaullist support.

5. To prepare for an advance by the UDF in 1983, M. Giscard would probably want not only to cut into the RPR but also to make a thrust towards the ground occupied by the moderate Left. Before 1983, it would probably be premature to attempt to persuade moderate members of the Socialist Party (PS) to join the governing majority in the National Assembly. But by appointing Ministers known for their liberal views and by adopting domestic economic and social policies attractive to centre-left opinion; M. Giscard might hope to win over some former PS voters at the Legislative elections. After 1983, backed by a strengthened centre, he would be in a better position to attempt to split off moderate PS elements in the Assembly.

6. M. Giscard's freedom of manoeuvre would be much reduced if, as seems more probable, he manages only to scrape home in

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both rounds of the Presidential election. This is likely if M. Chirac makes a good showing in the First Round and if M. Giscard is unprepared to do a deal with the RPR between the two rounds. Such a deal would be politically difficult for him. Nevertheless, M. Giscard would probably find it difficult to count on support for his new government in the National Assembly unless he was prepared to make concessions to the RPR, more particularly on economic policy. RPR support for anything which looked like M. Barre's policies would be unlikely. President Giscard would also be forced into continuing competition with the RPR to prove who was the more nationalist in defence of France's interests abroad. Even if the RPR felt constrained to give initial conditional support to M. Giscard they would be out to harry him in the run-up to the elections for the Legislature in 1983. If the tide of public opinion appeared to be going their way, the RPR might want to force early Legislative elections in the hope of increasing their strength in the National Assembly at the expense of the UDF and thereby tightening their hold over M. Giscard.

7. It is possible to envisage other variants of the foregoing scenarios. For example, M. Giscard might obtain a narrow victory over M. Mitterrand after dominating M. Chirac in the First Round. In this case, M. Giscard might succeed in breaking down the RPR but there would be less scope for winning over the centre-left. Alternatively, M. Giscard might

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win a substantial victory over M. Mitterrand after being run a close race by M. Chirac in the First Round. This result would however seem possible only if M. Giscard had reached some agreement with M. Chirac on the transfer of RPR votes in the Second Round. In these circumstances, the size of M. Giscard's second round majority would give a false impression of his post-electoral freedom from Gaullist restraints.

8. M. Mitterrand has said that, if he were elected, he would straight away dissolve the National Assembly and call elections for a new National Assembly before the end of June. He would appoint an interim government pending elections. There is however a possibility that M. Barre might refuse to resign as Prime Minister, as he would be entitled to do under the Constitution, on the grounds that he had not lost the confidence of the outgoing National Assembly. As M. Giscard would be eclipsed by his electoral defeat, M. Barre might find himself emerging as the focus of resistance to M. Mitterrand. The UDF itself would probably suffer some severe strains in the wake of a defeat of M. Giscard, but UDF politicians, preoccupied by the impending elections, might not wish to fight a pitched battle straight away under M. Barre, who could not escape some of the discredit of the defeat. M. Chirac and the RPR would in any case probably have a decisive voice in promoting or preventing any manoeuvre to keep M. Barre in office in order to make difficulties for M. Mitterrand. It would be more in character for M. Chirac to want to take the case against M. Mitterrand directly to the country.

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9. M. Mitterrand has expressed his willingness to govern with whatever parliamentary majority emerged from the elections which he would call for a new National Assembly. The PS would probably make some gains in the elections but not enough to have an absolute majority. The Communist Party's current attitude towards M. Mitterrand gives no reason for thinking that they would provide help for a PS government. Indeed, M. Marchais has threatened that if M. Mitterrand did not appoint a Government including communist Ministers the PCF would foment industrial action and street demonstrations against him. M. Mitterrand might eventually be able to patch together a mild PS government supported by the centre-right, but only at the expense of making major concessions on his political and economic programme and of earning the bitter opposition of the PCF. His difficulties would no doubt be exacerbated by the beginning of a flight from the franc and general destabilization of the economy, resulting from his own attempts to inaugurate by decree a socialist-looking programme to please his own followers and the attempts of the Communist Party and Confédération Générale du Travail to make him their prisoner or ruin his chances.

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10. The consequences of a Mitterrand victory are so uncertain that it is unprofitable to try to peep too far ahead. What is certain is that a Mitterrand victory would produce a completely different kind of Fifth Republic from the one which has existed since 1958. The balance of power between the President and the National Assembly would be substantially altered and conflict

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between them might become endemic. This probably does not mean that there would be a return to the political habits of the Fourth Republic. It would be more likely to produce a trial of strength outside Parliament. There would be a disorderly situation in which M. Chirac and the RPR might make a bid to be the saviours of France from socialist revolution. This is why some people toy with the daring idea of voting for M. Chirac on the First Round and, if he loses, letting M. Mitterrand in on the Second. But this is not a very likely eventuality. Probability favours a victory by M. Giscard and a resultant political situation corresponding to one or other of the models canvassed in paragraphs 4 to 8 above.

11. I am sending copies of this despatch to HM Representatives at Washington, Moscow and Community posts, to the Permanent Representatives to the European Communities and the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation and to HM Consuls General in France.

I have the honour to be
Your Lordship's obedient
servant,

A handwritten signature in cursive script, reading 'Reginald Hibbert'.

Reginald Hibbert