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Foreign and Commonwealth Office

London SW1A 2AH

2 August, 1982

Prime Minister

You may care to see.
A.J.C. 2/8

Dear John,

Sir John Fretwell made a courtesy call on the Mayor of Paris, M. Chirac, on 21 July. Despite the nature of the call most of the conversation stemmed from M. Chirac's position as effective leader of the French Opposition. You may care to have a copy of Sir John Fretwell's reporting letter.

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(F N Richards)
Private Secretary

A J Coles Esq
Private Secretary
10 Dowing Street

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BRITISH EMBASSY,
PARIS.

23 July 1982

A C Goodison Esq CMG CVO
AUSS
FCO

WES.
Submitted by [Signature] 26/7

Dear Alan,

CALL ON CHIRAC

1. I made a courtesy call on Chirac, as Mayor of Paris, on 21 July. I had met him previously, but it provided a useful occasion for a talk before the August break.

2. Chirac both began and concluded our conversation by expressing his high esteem for the Prime Minister. He asked for his personal regards to be conveyed to her. You may wish to draw this to the attention of No 10. He also referred warmly to his conversation with the Secretary of State during the EDU meeting on 1/2 July. He remarked, with good humour, that he had allowed the Secretary of State to censor his speech by deleting references to cooperation on tactical nuclear weapons: he noted wryly that without the burden of high office he did not have to concern himself too much with such matters, but understood that those with the responsibility of government could not afford indiscretions.

3. I asked Chirac about the government's attempt to divide up Paris. He brushed this aside as a mere political skirmish. He obviously thought he had done well out of it, but added that the government still retained the power to legislate in ways which could do him some damage. However he took comfort in the fact that Marseille had now been put in the same boat as Paris, so whatever was done to him would be done simultaneously to Defferre. He saw this as a useful safeguard.

4. He warmed to the theme of the total incompetence of the Mitterrand administration. He contrasted it in one respect with Labour governments in the UK: they had been weak and had looked for easy answers to economic problems; but Mitterrand was something quite different - he was a real Marxist. In Chirac's view, Mitterrand could not afford to alienate the communists and

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would go to extreme lengths to keep them on board. He cited as an example the recent decisions on the electoral system for next year's municipal elections. The Socialist Party had fought very hard for a system designed to weaken the communist party, but at the last minute Mitterrand had conceded to the communists that any party which gained 10% of the votes in the first round could put forward its own candidates in the second. This was exactly what the communists wanted and would greatly strengthen their electoral position. Mitterrand had so far pretended to stand up to the Soviet Union, but this would not last another six months: by the end of the year Mitterrand would be seeking Moscow's favour and next year he would come out against the installation of Pershings and cruise missiles in western Europe.

5. Chirac maintained that there would be serious trouble in France this autumn after the holiday break. He spoke of difficulties with both farmers and industrial workers and referred to past revolutions in France. He was sure that the government would not see out its term. I asked how in practice a government could be overthrown under the present French constitutional system. He did not give a direct answer and indeed acknowledged that the government might be able to continue until the 1986 legislative elections. But he referred to the extensive gains which the opposition would make at next year's municipal elections, to the likely break between the socialists and communists afterwards and to the general dissatisfaction with the government's performance. He saw all this as likely to bring about a situation in which the President would need to call fresh elections well before 1986. (Comment: we have heard this analysis before from adherents of both Chirac and Giscard. It is not clear why a President who has lost popularity should choose to dissolve an assembly in which he commands a majority, in order to call elections which could well provide a majority for the opposition.)

6. Chirac spoke scathingly about the government's conduct of foreign policy, especially in central America. He thought it foolish to alienate the United States. He felt certain that Chancellor Schmidt would not last more than a few months longer in the Federal Republic. There was therefore a prospect in a year or two of having four strong like-minded governments in the US, Britain, Germany and France. This would open the way for meaningful defence cooperation between the three European partners and would lead also to a tightening of defence links with the United States. At present, he thought the Germans had good reason to be nervous about sitting on a powder keg with no certainty that the Americans would in the last resort defend them. He saw a combined European effort, linked with the US, as providing a surer guarantee in the long term. But for this purpose, it would be essential for both Mitterrand and Schmidt to be swept away, while Reagan and Mrs Thatcher continued to hold office in their countries.

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7. I referred to disagreements which had arisen in the past between Britain and France over Community matters. He began by deploring that quarrels which had previously been between Britain and the rest of the Ten had become quarrels between Britain and France. He then seemed to sense that this was not a very promising line and said that British interests could never be reconciled with those of the rest of the Community. British leaders had been wiser when they had sought an association arrangement within a free trade area in the 1960s. I said that the problems should not be exaggerated. We had moved on a long way from the 1960s. The differences between the UK and France were essentially confined to the budget; and with good will it would be possible to find satisfactory and lasting solutions which balanced the interests of all parties involved. Chirac looked sceptical, but evidently did not think the point worth arguing at length: he commented that all these questions were minor - what mattered was the defence relationship, on which the future of Europe depended.

8. Chirac questioned me in some detail about what we expected to happen now in the Falklands. I replied on standard lines, making it clear that there could be no question of negotiation with Argentina over sovereignty in the foreseeable future. Chirac listened attentively. I had the impression that he has not decided quite which way to jump on the Falklands. At least he could have been left in no doubt about our position.

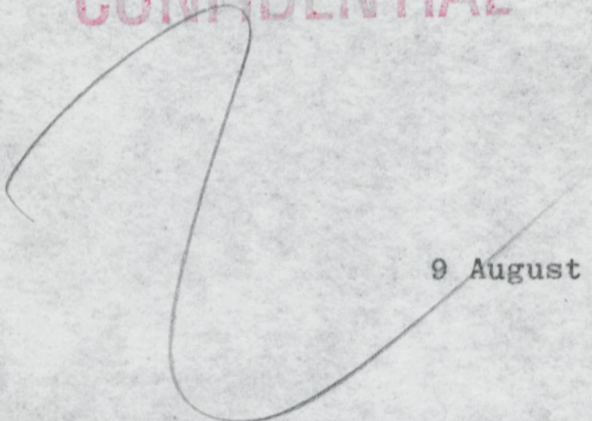
9. This apocalyptic view of the French domestic political scene is little changed from the assessment which Chirac gave to the Prime Minister when he saw her in London on 3 March. Chirac is an impressive political animal - lean and hungry - but he perhaps tends to confuse his wishes and political ambitions with reality. What he said about the Marxist inspiration of President Mitterrand and his inability to stand up to the Communist Party represents a very incomplete view of the relationship between Socialists and Communists in France and ignores the fact that the decline of the French Communist Party has derived in large part from Mitterrand's achievement in building up the Socialist Party in its place. The system adopted for next year's municipal elections is not ideal for the Socialist Party but reflects their need for a considerable measure of Communist support if the Left are to avoid severe losses to the present Opposition (Paris saving telno 72 of 16 July). As the emerging leader of this Opposition, with the wind in his sails at present, Chirac is quite right to adopt a vigorous broad brush approach to the deficiencies of the Mitterrand administration. But he is not of course an impartial observer.

John Fretwell

John Fretwell

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9 August 1982

Thank you for your letter of 2 August to John Coles enclosing a copy of Sir John Fretwell's report of his conversation with M. Chirac, which the Prime Minister has noted.

TIM FLESHER

F N Richards Esq
Foreign and Commonwealth Office

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