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no. 10

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FM PARIS 201044Z JUN 85

TO ROUTINE FCO

TELEGRAM NUMBER 520 OF 20 JUNE 1985

INFO OTHER EC POSTS, MADRID, LISBON

INFO SAVING CONSULS GENERAL FRANCE, WASHINGTON, UKDEL NATO

THE FRENCH POLITICAL SCENE

SUMMARY

1. MITTERRAND WILL GO TO THE MILAN EUROPEAN COUNCIL AGAINST A BACKGROUND OF DOMESTIC POLITICAL DIFFICULTY. BOTH HE AND THE SOCIALIST PARTY (PS) ARE WALLOWING IN THE POLLS, WHICH CURRENTLY PREDICT A COMFORTABLE VICTORY FOR THE OPPOSITION IN NEXT YEAR'S PARLIAMENTARY ELECTIONS. SHARP DIFFERENCES HAVE EMERGED WITHIN THE PS ABOUT HOW THE ELECTIONS SHOULD BE FOUGHT, AND RIVALRIES ARE GROWING BETWEEN CANDIDATES ALREADY POSITIONING THEMSELVES FOR THE PRESIDENTIAL ELECTIONS IN 1988. THESE ARE ADDITIONAL REASONS FOR MITTERRAND TO SEEK MODEST PROGRESS ON EUREKA AT MILAN, RATHER THAN RISK A CRASH FROM THE HIGH WIRE OF EUROPEAN UNION.

DETAIL

2. MITTERRAND WILL BE GOING TO THE MILAN EUROPEAN COUNCIL AT A TIME OF DOMESTIC POLITICAL DIFFICULTY. HIS POLL RATINGS REMAIN HISTORICALLY LOW FOR A PRESIDENT OF THE FIFTH REPUBLIC AND ARE CURRENTLY AGAIN ON A DOWNWARD TREND. FABIOUS TOO IS LOSING GROUND. A POLL IN YESTERDAY'S LE FIGARO MAKES PARTICULARLY GRIM READING FOR MITTERRAND. 60 PERCENT OF THOSE ASKED SAID THEY WOULD SUPPORT THE PARTIES OF THE RIGHT IN NEXT MARCH'S PARLIAMENTARY ELECTIONS AND ONLY 36 PERCENT THOSE OF THE LEFT. EVEN MORE OMINOUS FROM THE PRESIDENT'S POINT OF VIEW, THE OPPOSITION ALLIANCE OF THE CENTRALIST UDF, THE NEO-GAULLIST RPR AND THEIR MINOR ALLIES WOULD, ON PRESENT SHOWING, WIN 51 PERCENT OF THE VOTE AND A CLEAR PARLIAMENTARY MAJORITY. THIS WOULD ENABLE THEM TO AVOID DIFFICULT AND POTENTIALLY DIVISIVE POST-ELECTORAL CHOICES ABOUT WHETHER TO COOPERATE WITH LE PEN'S EXTREME RIGHT FRONT NATIONAL, SO ESCAPING ONE OF THE TRAPS WHICH MITTERRAND SET BY INTRODUCING A SYSTEM OF PROPORTIONAL REPRESENTATION.

3. IN ADDITION TO THE STUBBORN PROBLEM OF PERSONAL UNPOPULARITY, MITTERRAND IS ALSO FACED WITH A SOCIALIST PARTY IN SERIOUS DISARRAY. FOR MONTHS THE PS HAS DRAWN COMFORT FROM THE OPPOSITION'S DIVISIONS, AS EXEMPLIFIED BY THE RIVALRIES BETWEEN BARRE, CHIRAC AND GISCARD. SUDDENLY THE SOCIALISTS ARE SPLIT BY DIVISIONS OF THEIR OWN. THE IMMEDIATE REASON IS A SHARP DIFFERENCE OF VIEW IN THE PARTY OVER HOW TO CONDUCT THE CAMPAIGN FOR NEXT YEAR'S PARLIAMENTARY ELECTIONS. FABIOUS SEES HIMSELF PLAYING THE DOMINANT ROLE AS PRIME MINISTER AND LEADER OF THE PARLIAMENTARY MAJORITY, AND WANTS THE PS TO FIGHT ON A LARGELY UNIDEOLOGICAL PLATFORM OF ECONOMIC MODERNISATION AND NATIONAL UNITY,

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WHICH WOULD HAVE APPEAL TO CENTRALIST VOTERS. JOSPIN, ON THE OTHER HAND, AS FIRST SECRETARY OF THE PARTY, BELIEVES HE SHOULD LEAD THE PS DURING THE ELECTIONS AND THAT IT SHOULD BASE ITS APPEAL ON TRADITIONAL SOCIALIST POLICIES. TENSIONS BETWEEN FABIUS AND JOSPIN, AND THEIR SUPPORTERS, ARE NOW ACUTE.

4. MITTERRAND HAS THE AUTHORITY TO SORT THINGS OUT IN THE SHORT TERM, BUT EVEN HE MAY BE BAFFLED BY THE LONGER TERM PROBLEM OF PERSONAL RIVALRIES RELATING TO THE PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION IN 1988. FABIUS AND JOSPIN ARE FIGHTING FOR THE LEADING ROLE IN NEXT YEAR'S CAMPAIGN BECAUSE THEY BELIEVE THIS WILL ENHANCE THEIR PROSPECTS OF BEING THE SOCIALIST PARTY'S PRESIDENTIAL CANDIDATE IN 1988, ASSUMING MITTERRAND STANDS DOWN. THEY ARE ALL THE MORE ANXIOUS TO ESTABLISH THEIR SUPREMACY BECAUSE THEY ARE CONSCIOUS THAT ROCARD (WHO RESIGNED FROM THE GOVERNMENT IN APRIL), IS ALSO POSITIONING HIMSELF TO CHALLENGE FOR THE PARTY NOMINATION IN 1988. HE MAY NOT BE LIKED WITHIN THE PS APPARAT, BUT HE REMAINS VERY POPULAR IN THE COUNTRY AT LARGE. HIS ANNOUNCEMENT ON A TV PROGRAMME LAST WEEK THAT HE INTENDS TO RUN FOR THE ELYSEE IN 1988 HAS SHARPENED ANIMOSITIES AND CONCENTRATED MINDS WITHIN THE PS ABOUT THE POST-MITTERRAND PERIOD.

5. THERE ARE NINE MONTHS BEFORE THE PARLIAMENTARY ELECTIONS NEXT YEAR (UNLESS MITTERRAND CALLS THEM PREMATURELY - A POSSIBILITY WHICH SEEMS REMOTE BUT CANNOT BE ENTIRELY EXCLUDED). BUT AS MITTERRAND SETS OUT FOR MILAN, DOMESTIC POLITICAL PROBLEMS WILL BE WEIGHING HEAVILY ON HIS MIND. THE CURRENT SITUATION IS DIFFICULT FOR HIM: AND THE OMENS FOR 1986 DISTINCTLY UNFAVOURABLE. ALTHOUGH I WOULD NOT MAKE MUCH OF THIS, I THOUGHT WHEN I SPOKE BRIEFLY TO HIM ON 18 JUNE THAT HE LOOKED MORE CAREWORN THAN ON ANY PREVIOUS OCCASION. AT MILAN HE WILL BE ESPECIALLY CONCERNED TO AVOID EXPOSING MORE FLANK THAN NECESSARY TO AN INCREASINGLY CONFIDENT OPPOSITION. THIS WILL BE AN ADDITIONAL REASON FOR HIM TO PREFER A MODEST ADVANCE ON EUREKA TO AN APPEARANCE OF FAILURE IN PURSUING GRANDER EUROPEAN AMBITIONS.

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MR DEREK THOMAS

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