

CONFIDENTIAL

BY BAG.

SAVING TELEGRAM

FROM PARIS

CONFIDENTIAL

TO FCO SAVING TELNO 7 OF 24 JANUARY 1986

REPEATED FOR INFORMATION TO SAVING EC POSTS, WASHINGTON, UKDEL  
NATO, CONSULS GENERAL IN FRANCE

(COLLAR)

MY SAVINGGRAM NO 2 OF 10 JANUARY : INTERNAL FRENCH POLITICS

SUMMARY

1. The campaign is slowly warming up. The RPR/UDF alliance have published their joint manifesto; Giscard has expounded powerfully on cohabitation; and Mitterrand has continued to dominate the socialists' campaign with a strong performance at Grand-Quevilly. His personal popularity is still edging up, but there is argument as to whether the socialists are also improving their score. The Front National may be fading.

DETAIL

2. The election campaign is now in practice under way, although officially it does not start for another 3 weeks. Although Parliament has been recalled in extraordinary session to discuss a government bill on flexible working hours, the major political figures are already on the campaign trail.

3. The main event of the last fortnight has been the publication of the RPR/UDF joint manifesto. I am reporting separately and in detail on this (my saving telegram numbers 4 and 5), since it represents the most authoritative statement yet on the policies which any right-wing coalition emerging from the election is likely to follow. Although the manifesto tries not to give too many hostages to fortune, the section on economic policy represents a marked shift away from traditional French ideas on the role of the State in controlling economic activity.

4. Other noteworthy events on the right of the political spectrum have included the decision of Jean-Maxime Lévêque (who set up the Union Nationale pour l'Initiative et Responsabilité in 1982 after his bank was nationalised by the socialists) to abandon his bid for separate lists for the UNIR group and throw his weight behind the RPR. On 14 January, Giscard held a major press conference in which he presented an intellectually impressive interpretation of the Constitution to buttress his view that cohabitation was not only possible but proper. (Of practical interest to the UK was his comment that it should be possible to discuss calmly the question of France's representation at EC Summit meetings : the RPR have been arguing that after the elections, it should be the Prime Minister, not Mitterrand, who attended). Giscard's unspoken message was that he would be the man best able to ensure that a new government would act both in the spirit and the letter of the Constitution; and a suitably qualified candidate for high office. Meanwhile, Chirac, after

/signing

CONFIDENTIAL

signing the joint manifesto (paragraph 3 above) promptly disappeared from Paris to start a marathon speaking tour which is planned to take him to some 50 towns throughout the country. The malicious are commenting that he is opting out of Paris - although he is Mayor - during much of the election campaign, because he prefers perpetual motion to the challenge of the TV. Barre has maintained his longely stance, but continues his apparently inexorable rise in the polls despite his opposition to cohabitation, which is what most Frenchmen say they favour. He is seen by many as the man waiting in the wings, on whom France will call in the hour of need. But his line makes it harder for the RPR/UDF alliance to present themselves as a convincing prospective government for 16 March.

5. Mitterrand's hand is increasingly evident behind the socialists' campaign. Not only has he kept himself much in the public eye (e.g. the CFL ceremonies at Lille), but he also made a powerful speech on 17 January at a large meeting arranged specifically to give him this platform, at Grand-Quevilly in Seine-Maritime, the département where Fabius is standing as a candidate. Although this was an overtly electioneering performance, Mitterrand pitched his appeal ostensibly to «the entire French people», while defending vigorously the «major reforms and good administration» of the socialist government. He warned the nation against allowing what had been achieved to be swept away, were the present opposition to gain power. This offensive seems to have rattled the opposition, who promptly announced their decision to counter-attack, but have not yet managed to do so. Mitterrand supposedly has only 3 weeks' more active involvement, for he has proclaimed that unlike his predecessors he will abstain once the election campaign opens officially : but even if he is less in evidence on the battlements, he will still no doubt be actively marshalling his troops and lobbing the odd missile at the Opposition.

6. One theme which the PS is deploying is that of «le vote utile». They argue that a vote of 30% for them would be enough to deny the RPR/UDF a clear majority («the blocking third») and that a vote for the communists is a wasted vote. Whether this would in fact be true would depend very much on how evenly spread PS votes were around the different departments: an effective block might well need 32 - 35% overall to be translated into enough seats; and the RPR/UDF would probably need to drop below 42% to lose a clear majority - which at present seems unlikely. Be that as it may, the argument could hold attraction for left wing voters. It has spurred Marchais into retorting that a vote for the PS is tantamount to supporting the RPR/UDF opposition since the socialists' policies have become almost indistinguishable.

7. The socialists have been claiming that not only is Mitterrand's personal popularity continuing to rise, but so is that of the PS. The former is confirmed by the latest figures which show the number of Frenchmen who approve of Mitterrand's performance as being in balance with those who disapprove (at 42%) - his best rating since 1982. On the PS's popularity,

/there is

there is conflicting evidence from the opinion polls. Of the four most recent polls, two have shown the PS score stuck at 26%, while the two others have shown it up at 30%. It may be no accident that the first two were commissioned by right wing publications and the last two by journals on the left or centre. Meanwhile, the RPR/UDF is still steady at 44% (only one poll gave it 47%), and the Communists are hovering around 10 - 11%. There are signs that the Front National's score is down : two polls put it at only 5% (although two others had it still at 8 - 9%). Le Pen alleges that opinion polls traditionally underestimate the level of support for the FN (presumably because those polled may hesitate to admit an intention to vote FN); but the idea of «le vote utile» may be beginning to bite with right-wing voters as well.

MF

A03M

FRETWELL

EUROPEAN POLITICAL

WED