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BY BAG
SAVING TELEGRAM
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[COLLAR]

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TO FCO

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MY SAVINGRAM NO 7 OF 24 JANUARY : INTERNAL FRENCH POLITICS

SUMMARY

1. The election campaign has not been going well for the opposition. Barre's determined independence and sustained hostility to cohabitation has embarrassed them, and offered an easy target to the socialists (PS). By contrast, the latter have seemed more united, more coherent and better-led than their opponents, and their morale has improved accordingly. The Right need to close ranks and turn their fire on the PS rather than themselves if they are to be sure of a clear-cut victory.

DETAIL

2. The election campaign has not been going well for the Right. In recent days their internal divisions have been glaringly apparent, so much so that some commentators have been asking sarcastically whether they are fighting the socialists or each other.

3. The principal cause of the Right's discomfort is Barre, who continues to pursue an independent and frequently contentious course, to the dismay and embarrassment of the opposition as a whole. In the last ten days he has thrown his weight behind a dissident Barriste list in a department near Paris, which will take votes from the official UDF/RPR candidates; he has reiterated his opposition to a government of the Right cohabiting with Mitterrand after the elections, and says he will not support it; and he has refused an invitation from Giscard to opposition leaders to attend a joint rally at Clermond-Ferrand before the elections to demonstrate UDF/RPR unity. This, he says, would be inappropriate since he and his colleagues do not agree about the fundamental question of cohabitation.

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4. Barre runs the risk of being seen by the public as the wrecker of the opposition's campaign. But so far, despite attacks on him by members of Chirac's and Giscard's immediate entourages, there is no sign of this happening. Instead the electorate seem to take the view that Barre is to be admired for his independent stance and for the strength of his convictions. The socialists meanwhile have been revelling in the Right's difficulties, with Mitterrand paying ironic tribute to Barre for the help he has been giving to the socialists' cause, and PS leaders generally pointing to the opposition's divisions as evidence that the UDF/RPR are incoherent, and unfit to govern.

5. This squabbling has distracted the Right from their main task: that of attacking the government and of explaining their own policies. They have appeared preoccupied, defensive, and lacking in direction. With Chirac largely absent from Paris, Giscard in the Auvergne, and Barre making unhelpful headlines, the socialists have seemed more united, better organised, and better led. Mitterrand has increasingly emerged as one of the dominant figures of a campaign in which he originally said he would take no part. Pleased by the impact of his recent interventions, he has reversed an earlier commitment to say nothing during the official campaign (beginning on 24 February), and has announced that he will now participate as and when he chooses until the campaign closes on 14 March.

6. Encouraged by the Right's divisions, the socialists have also taken heart from some better opinion poll results. Even allowing for the fact that one poll giving them 30% has now been discredited, two others which have appeared in recent days have given them and their MRG allies 28%; and a poll published in Le Monde last week, on the basis of a larger than usual sample, gave them and the MRG 31%. The Le Monde poll was particularly encouraging for the PS since it showed the UDF/RPR at 42%, a score which might not be enough to give them a clear victory. But, as the UDF/RPR are quick to point out, the other polls give them a significantly better reading of between 45 - 48%, enough for a comfortable majority. The accuracy and importance of the polls will no doubt continue to be debated, and to affect the calculations of all the parties, but recent results have helped reinforce a sense among socialists that, after months in the doldrums, they have at last regained momentum and perhaps the political initiative. They have begun to hope that they may after all emerge as the largest single party, and to speculate about the chances of the UDF/RPR failing to win a clear majority.

7. With this in mind the PS have continued to try to squeeze the communists, by appealing to PCF supporters not to waste their vote but to support the only party on the Left that offers any real obstacle to the Right's ambitions. There are signs that some communist voters find this argument persuasive, more so indeed than their own party's line that there is nothing to choose between the socialists and the

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Right. The PCF leadership has been sufficiently exercised by the socialists' siren call, and by the PCF's own poor showing in the campaign (some polls have suggested that the party could fall below the psychologically crucial threshold of 10% of the vote), to hold a special Central Committee meeting on 3 February. The upshot was a decision to remain critical of the PS but to balance this with more vigorous attacks on the Right, in the hope that this will prevent large-scale defections to the socialists.

8. As for the Front National, on their present showing of 6 - 8%, they might just fall short of the 30 seats in the new National Assembly that are necessary for formal recognition as a Parliamentary group. If so, their scope for disrupting the new Parliament, and for embarrassing any UDF/RPR majority, would be reduced.

CONCLUSION

9. With five weeks to go until polling day, the UDF/RPR remain on course for a majority. But their margin of advance over the socialists and their own self-confidence have diminished. They have fought an inept campaign in recent weeks, and have begun to look vulnerable. They now badly need to close ranks and focus the electorate's attention on the socialists' shortcomings rather than on their own, if they are to ensure that a clear-cut victory does not elude them.


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