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SAVING TELEGRAM

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SAVING TELEGRAM [COLLAR]
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MY SAVING TELEGRAM NO 18 OF 28 FEBRUARY : THE FRENCH ELECTIONS

SUMMARY

1. Another week of hard electoral grind, with more arguments and speculation about cohabitation, stirred up by Mitterrand's final pre-election television interview. He warned of difficulties if a Right-wing majority were elected, but also appeared to signal his readiness to make cohabitation work if the Right respected his presidential prerogatives. Chaban-Delmas subsequently issued a reminder that Chirac is not the only RPR candidate for Prime Minister. The opposition are quietly confident of a comfortable but not overwhelming victory. Their optimism is not fully borne out by the polls which show the gap narrowing. However, France is probably only a week away from electing a Right wing majority to govern with a socialist President.

DETAIL

2. The past week has been largely dominated by renewed argument on cohabitation, stimulated by Mitterrand. In an effort to give the socialists' faltering campaign new momentum, he appeared in an hour-long television interview on 2 March, for what he said was to be his last intervention before polling day. He claimed to speak as the President, above party politics; but saw no difficulty in combining this with explicit support for the socialists and with a warning that the election of a Right-wing majority could cause serious political difficulties.

3. He balanced this attempt to frighten voters away from the RPR/UDF, however, by declaring for the first time in public that, if the Right won, he would respect the popular will and appoint a Prime Minister from within the new majority. (This has for the moment stilled speculation that he might call on a socialist to try to form a minority government if, as seems almost certain, the PS remains the largest single party in the new Assembly.) But he added that he would do this without any intention of allowing his own presidential role to be diminished; and, in the most widely remarked passage of the interview, he went on to say that he would resign rather than allow his powers to be compromised.

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4. Barre was quick to pick this up and, at a large UDF rally in Paris two days later, argued that by raising the possibility of resignation Mitterrand was admitting that cohabitation was unnatural and unworkable (something which of course Barre has been arguing for months). In fact it seems more likely that Mitterrand's intention was to warn the Right that cohabitation will have to be a process of give and take, and that they should not set out to humiliate him or try to reduce his presidential prerogatives (with the further implication that if they went too far, he could always cut short his mandate, which Chirac must avoid while Barre has such a lead in public opinion). In other words, rather than implicitly subscribing to Barre's thesis, he was signalling that cohabitation can be made to work, anyway for a time.

5. Mitterrand gave no hint during the interview as to whom he would choose as Prime Minister, if the Right won. The RPR insist it must be Chirac, who is conducting himself in a way designed to show that he would be a determined but nevertheless 'cohabitable' Prime Minister. But it is not only the UDF who are challenging what they see as his presumption (see my TUR). Chaban-Delmas, also of the RPR, but foe of Chirac and friend of Mitterrand, reminded everyone of his ambitions this week when he gave an interview to a Swiss newspaper restating his claim to Matignon. He did it in such terms that it was easy to disavow afterwards. But he captured the headlines for a day and his purpose was served.

6. Despite Mitterrand's personal efforts to tilt the scale in the PS's favour, there is now a greater sense of confidence among the RPR and UDF than there was two or three weeks ago that they will win a clear majority; and a greater mood of pessimism among the socialists that they are not going to be able to stop them. The polls continue to bear this out. The most recent one to appear puts the PS at 30% and the RPR/UDF at 45% which, when the Dom-Toms are included, would give the socialists and their MRG allies about 208 seats and the RPR and UDF a combined score of about 313 seats, or a majority over all other parties of about 49. The same poll puts the communists at 11% with 39 seats, and the Front National at 6.5% with 15 seats; but some commentators believe that there may be a tendency to overestimate support for the communists and to underestimate it for the FN (as was the case before the 1984 European elections). If so, the FN could yet run the communists closer in votes and seats than the polls are now predicting. More seats for the FN could also bite into the prospective RPR/UDF majority.

CONCLUSION

7. Candidates and electorate alike enter the home-straight relieved that the tape is in sight. The campaign has never really caught fire, partly because it has been going on so long; partly because by abolishing constituencies the new

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system of proportional representation has taken a good deal of the interest out of the election at the local level; and partly because, for much of the time, it has been fought in atrocious weather. The socialists have made up ground in recent weeks, but not enough. The RPR/UDF have lost ground; but if the opinion polls and our own observations are anything to go by, not enough to prevent them from winning. Barring a late swing of opinion, or some major and unexpected development, France appears to be a week away from electing a Right-wing majority, to govern with a Left-wing President.



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