

SAVING TELEGRAM
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(COLLAR)

PARIS TELNO SAVING 45: FRENCH POLITICS

SUMMARY

1. Parliament has at last ended its long and busy session with a final burst of activity. The government has fulfilled over half of the majority's platform objectives. Press comment generally gives Chirac good marks for this, although plenty more difficulties lie ahead, including electoral reform.

DETAIL

2. The parliamentary session wound to its close during the night of 12-13 August. It has been a long haul by French standards: the extraordinary session has meant that Parliament has sat almost without interruption since 2 April when Chirac's government first took office. Business has been conducted at a cracking pace: 26 major bills have been debated, of which 16 have already passed into law; and extensive use has been made of Article 49/3 of the Constitution (guillotine) to shorten the discussion.

3. We have already reported in detail the main achievements (summarised in MacRae's letter of 3 July to Dain on Chirac's first hundred days). But the major landmarks have been:

- 2 June: enabling law to allow the government to legislate by decree on certain key economic and social matters. Guillotined.
- 24 June: retroactive budget to modify the existing budget for the rest of the year. Guillotined.
- 25 June: law on redundancies, freeing employers from the previous administrative procedures.
- 27 June: press law (for greater transparency). Guillotined.
- 9 July: law altering the constitutional prospects for New Caledonia.
- 11 July: enabling law to allow changes to the electoral system to be introduced by decree. Guillotined.
- 29 July: law on police controls of identity, etc.

/31 July

31 July: law on privatisations. Should normally have been dealt with by decree; but Mitterrand refused to sign and the matter had therefore to go back to Parliament.

7 August: laws on crime (stiffer sentences for certain crimes), sentences (reductions to be more strictly controlled), foreigners (reducing the categories of foreigners who cannot be expelled; halting the automatic issue of 10-year residence cards for certain categories of foreigners, etc) and terrorism (increasing time during which suspected terrorists can be held without charge to 48 hours, etc).

12 August: law on audiovisual reform which inter alia will lead to the privatisation of 1 of the 3 national TV channels, and the cancelling of the contract for 2 of the 3 private channels.

4. Press comment on this achievement has been generally positive. Predictably, Figaro's headline today proclaims: «La France désocialisée». It goes on to emphasise that the government won no less than 6 votes of confidence despite its slim majority, and claims that 12 out of the 20 fundamental objectives of the government's platform have already been attained. More surprisingly, Libération (left wing) also agrees that Chirac has won Round One. It argues that in ramming through the main parts of its platform so fast, Chirac's government has proved that cohabitation is no obstacle to action and that power has shifted decisively to Matignon. Mitterrand's hope that the presence of the Front National would break the unity of the majority has not been fulfilled. Nor has the return to proportional representation produced a parliament where the shifting alliances of the Fourth Republic have reappeared. However, the government has yet to prove that the new reforms are good ones. So the next stage of cohabitation will not necessarily prove any easier.

5. The next hurdle for the government (and test for cohabitation) is the redrawing of the electoral boundaries, on which we shall be reporting separately. Already, the 6-man commission appointed by the government has raised numerous objections. Private negotiations with Mitterrand now seem likely, before the draft law is taken by the Council of Ministers, probably on 10 September. There is already speculation as to what will happen if Mitterrand then refuses to sign the decree.

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