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FM PARIS 211750Z JUN 83

TO ROUTINE FCO

TELEGRAM NUMBER 550 OF 21 JUNE 1983

CHIRAC'S VISIT TO LONDON: 24/25 JUNE

SUMMARY

1. CHIRAC, PRESIDENT OF THE GAULLIST RPR AND MAYOR OF PARIS, WILL BE IN LONDON ON 24/25 JUNE FOR THE FORMATION OF THE INTERNATIONAL DEMOCRATIC UNION. CHIRAC IS THE LEADING FIGURE WITHIN THE FRENCH OPPOSITION, BUT WILL CONTINUE TO FACE STRONG CHALLENGES FROM BARRE AND GISCARD. HE AROUSES MINGLED FEELINGS OF ADMIRATION AND APPREHENSION IN BOTH SUPPORTERS AND OPPONENTS.

DETAIL

2. A YEAR AGO WHEN CHIRAC PLAYED HOST TO THE EUROPEAN DEMOCRATIC UNION HIS POLITICAL POWER BASE AS MAYOR OF PARIS WAS UNDER THREAT FROM THE FRENCH GOVERNMENT'S PROPOSED REFORM OF LOCAL GOVERNMENT. CHIRAC NOT ONLY SAW OFF THE GOVERNMENT'S CHALLENGE BUT TURNED IT TO HIS ADVANTAGE. IN THE MARCH MUNICIPAL ELECTIONS IN PARIS HE CARRIED ALL BEFORE HIM. ELSEWHERE HIS PARTY WAS THE PRINCIPAL BENEFICIARY OF THE SWING TO THE OPPOSITION. THESE ELECTORAL SUCCESSES HAVE HELPED CHIRAC CONSOLIDATE HIS POSITION IN THE OPINION POLLS AS FRANCE'S LEADING OPPOSITION POLITICAN AHEAD OF BARRE AND GISCARD, IN THAT ORDER. A RECENT SURVEY, ALBEIT COMMISSIONED BY THE RPR, HAS SHOWN THAT HE WOULD BE THE STRONGEST OPPOSITION CANDIDATE IN THE (VERY UNLIKELY) EVENT OF A PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION BEING HELD IN THE NEXT TWO OR THREE YEARS.

3. CHIRAC HIMSELF REFUSES TO SPECULATE IN PUBLIC ABOUT SUCH AN EVENTUALITY. INSTEAD HIS ATTENTION IS BEGINNING TO FOCUS ON THE 1984 EUROPEAN ELECTIONS AS THE NEXT OPPORTUNITY FOR THE OPPOSITION TO DEMONSTRATE AT THE POLLS THAT THE LEFT NO LONGER COMMANDS MAJORITY SUPPORT. CHIRAC HAS EVIDENTLY DECIDED THAT IT WILL BE IN THE INTEREST OF THE OPPOSITION, AND OF HIS PLACE WITHIN IT, FOR HIM TO BECOME THE PRINCIPAL ADVOCATE OF OPPOSITION UNITY. AT CHIRAC'S BIDDING THE RPR HAVE FOR SOME MONTHS BEEN MAKING THE RUNNING IN DISCUSSION WITH THE GISCARDIAN UDF ON A COMMON PROGRAMME OF GOVERNMENT. NOW CHIRAC IS URGING SIMONE VEIL TO LEAD A JOINT OPPOSITION LIST FOR THE EUROPEAN ELECTIONS. TO FACILITATE UDF ACCEPTANCE OF SUCH A PROPOSAL, THE RPR HAS ADOPTED A MORE POSITIVE POLICY PLATFORM ON EUROPEAN COOPERATION. THE UDF, FEARFUL OF BEING CRUSHED IN CHIRAC'S EMBRACE, IS PLAYING HARD TO GET. BUT CHIRAC IS A PERSISTENT SUITOR. HE PROBABLY RECKONS THAT EVEN IF HIS ADVANCES ARE BRUSHED ASIDE, THE UDF WILL BE PENALISED BY THE VOTERS FOR REJECTING A DESIRABLE MATCH.

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4. CHIRAC'S EFFORTS TO PERSUADE PUBLIC OPINION THAT HE IS A UNIFYING RATHER THAN A DIVISIVE FORCE IN THE OPPOSITION APPEAR TO BE MAKING SOME HEADWAY, EXCEPT AMONG HARD-CORE GISCARDIANS. HE HAS HAD LESS SUCCESS IN RIDDING HIMSELF OF HIS REPUTATION FOR OPPORTUNISM. CHIRAC'S POLICY U-TURNS, MOST RECENTLY ON EUROPE, FREQUENTLY CONVEY A FLAVOUR OF SHORT-TERM POLITICAL EXPEDIENCY. CHIRAC ALSO AROUSES DISTRUST BY APPEARING TOO IMPATIENT TO HUSTLE THE GOVERNMENT OUT OF OFFICE. HE IS NO LONGER PRESSING FOR EARLY LEGISLATIVE ELECTIONS. BUT HIS CURRENT CALL FOR A REFERENDUM ON THE GOVERNMENT'S ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL POLICIES - A PROPOSAL OF DUBIOUS CONSTITUTIONAL VALIDITY - HAS REVIVED CHARGES THAT HE IS UNSCRUPULOUS IN SEEKING TO UNDERMINE THE LEGITIMACY OF THE ELECTED GOVERNMENT.

5. DURING THE WAVE OF SOCIAL UNREST IN FRANCE IN MAY, CHIRAC SHOWED THAT HE WAS AWARE OF THE DANGER OF BEING TOO CLOSELY ASSOCIATED WITH EXTRA-PARLIAMENTARY PROTEST AGAINST THE GOVERNMENT. HE SEES THE OPPOSITION AS HAVING A DUAL ROLE: TO COOL THE PASSION OF OPPONENTS OF GOVERNMENT POLICY WHILE HARNESSING THEIR ENERGIES. CHIRAC HAS NO DIFFICULTY IN ATTRACTING SUPPORT FROM THOSE ON THE RIGHT OF THE OPPOSITION. BUT TO ACHIEVE HIS LONG-TERM AMBITIONS HE NEEDS TO APPEAL BEYOND THE CONFINES OF HIS OWN PARTY. IN THE PRESENT AGITATED MOOD OF FRENCH POLITICS HE HAS DECIDED TO PLAY A STATESMAN-LIKE ROLE. CHIRAC OBVIOUSLY ATTACHES IMPORTANCE TO HIS CHANCE IN LONDON TO BE SEEN MEETING THE PRIME MINISTER AND CHANCELLOR KOHL, WHICH WILL ADD TO HIS STANDING AS A NATIONAL POLITICAL LEADER.

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