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BY BAG

SAVING TELEGRAM

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(COLLAR)

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TO FCO

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MY TELNO SAVING 54 : FRENCH POLITICS

SUMMARY

1. Good results for the majority in recent elections and opinion polls mean that Chirac is riding high as Parliament reassembles. Mitterrand has refused to sign the decree on electoral reform and the Government will now legislate; but cohabitation is not at risk. There are problems ahead, but at present the majority is in better shape than the opposition.

DETAIL

2. Parliament reassembled on 2 October with Chirac in a good position. The majority won 45.9% of the vote in the Haute-Garonne by-election on 28 September, an increase of 2.8% compared with the March legislative elections: and on the same day the RPR (Chirac's own Party) emerged well from the elections for a third of the Senate. They won an extra 17 seats, taking their total to 77 Senators, and making them the largest single Party in the Senate for the first time. In addition, the latest opinion polls indicate a surge of support for Chirac, one poll indicating that 58% of the electorate think he is doing a good job, a jump of 12% in a month, and his best score since the early 1970s.

3. Chirac has benefited from his tough-talking response to recent terrorist attacks, and from the mood of national solidarity which the bombings have produced. This has helped the Government to project an image of energy and confidence which has confounded those (including Barre and Fabius) who insisted that neither cohabitation nor an RPR/UDF coalition would work. For the moment at least, Chirac seems to have proved them wrong, and to have increased his esteem among a public which, all the signs suggest, wishes to avoid a political crisis and the breakdown of cohabitation.

4. Mitterrand has also benefited, but to a lesser degree: his poll rating is up 6% this month to 61%. But as the Haute-Garonne by-election showed, he remains much more popular than the Socialist Party (PS). Jospin in the end did just well enough to save face, maintaining the PS's vote at 37.4%, a drop of 0.5% compared with March, and enabling the Socialists narrowly to hang on to their fourth seat in the department (the other 4 went to the majority). But as Jospin himself acknowledged, there is no evidence that public opinion has shifted back towards the PS since March, as some Socialists were claiming. Indeed, the evidence points rather to the consolidation of the 55/45% split in favour of the Right apparent in the March elections.

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5. In these circumstances, Mitterrand has no interest in dissolving the Assembly and holding new elections, nor in an early Presidential contest. This is one of the reasons why, although he has now refused to sign the decree on electoral reform, insisting that it is an issue for Parliament, the Elysee has been at pains to insist that it is not the President's intention to provoke a crisis. Nor is there likely to be one: the Government and majority had expected the refusal and will now enact the legislation by Parliamentary means. Chirac appears confident that all the components of the majority, including the small parties of the UDF, will refrain from opposing the Bill.

CONCLUSION

6. As the new Parliamentary Session begins, the initiative appears to lie with Chirac. The RPR is united, encouraged by recent election and poll results, and comforted by the divisions that have emerged among the Socialists about how best to recapture electoral support. It may not last (a further out-burst of terrorism, a difficult budget debate or further bad news over unemployment, could all change the public mood); but for the moment the majority is benefiting more from cohabitation than the opposition.

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