

SAVING TELEGRAM

FROM PARIS

CONFIDENTIAL

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SAVING TO (FOR INFO) EC POSTS, WASHINGTON, MOSCOW, UKDEL NATO
AND HM CONSULS GENERAL IN FRANCE

THE FRENCH POLITICAL SCENE ms

SUMMARY

1. The Majority begins the new Parliamentary session divided over policies and personalities. The Socialists (PS) hope to capitalise but are handicapped by uncertainty over whether Mitterrand will stand again for the presidency. If he does not, they will probably turn to Rocard. Although presidential calculations preoccupy them, French politicians are also exercised by France's mediocre economic performance and by international developments, especially in East/West affairs. The mood is one of anxiety.

DETAIL

2. Parliament reassembled at the beginning of April. Chirac began the session by asking for a vote of confidence, an attempt at a fresh start after the Government's winter of discontent. He obtained it comfortably (294 to 282) but his success cannot disguise the fact that morale within the Majority remains fragile, and tensions sharp. There are serious differences over policy and presentation. The RPR favour the tough line on law and order issues adopted by Pasqua and Pandraud (Interior Ministry) while the UDF, who champion human rights, call for a less authoritarian approach. There are divergences too on the economy, with the Barristes urging that priority should be given to investment, a strategy which Balladur (Finance Minister) rejects. New Caledonia is the latest bone of contention, with the Centrists in the UDF concerned that the referendum, which the RPR is determined to hold in the territory later this year, may exacerbate rather than alleviate the problem.

3. Chirac's response has been to urge the Majority to remain disciplined and united. In formal terms it will probably do so: his Parliamentary majority is not at risk. But his wish to still the discordant notes is a pious hope. Confidence in his leadership was undermined by the student demonstrations and public sector strikes at the end of last year; and his subsequent decline in the opinion polls has done nothing to help him restore his authority. Meanwhile, Barre, who has overtaken him in the polls, continues deftly to make plain his reservations about the Government's programme and performance. Chirac is also forced to look over his right shoulder at Le Pen, who will formally announce his candidacy for the presidency on 26 April. The Front National is currently attracting

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considerable attention, capitalising on Chirac's decision to retreat on controversial social legislation such as the proposed reform of the Nationality Code (which would have made it harder for immigrants to obtain French citizenship). Chirac's only consolation is that Léotard seems increasingly tempted to enter the presidential race too. If he does so, he would probably help Chirac by harming Barre.

4. The Socialists are pleased by the Right's difficulties and by their own relatively good showing in the opinion polls (although there is still a 6-7% gap between Left and Right overall). But they are suffering from uncertainty over whether Mitterrand intends to stand for a second term. They will back him if he does; and he is clearly preparing the ground so that he will be favourably placed if he decides to run. But he is unlikely to announce his decision until next year, when his choice will be much influenced by how certain he is of winning. If the prospect is doubtful, he may choose to stand aside and leave the field to Rocard who, after the PS's recent congress, is increasingly confident that he would secure the party's nomination in Mitterrand's absence. Whether he would secure the party's enthusiastic support may be another matter.

5. Although the presidential elections are now beginning to dominate French political life, other themes impinge. One is anxiety about the economy. Chirac's brave claims that France will overtake the FRG in the 1990s meet at best with polite scepticism. They look unconvincing against the background of rising inflation and unemployment, and a growth-rate which compares unfavourably with France's principal EC partners (not least our own which has recently been attracting considerable attention here). There is a palpable sense of anxiety that the successful economic recipe of the 1960s and 1970s has been lost and that, unless France is careful, it will slide down the league table. The international context is worrying la class politique too. They are perturbed about the prospect of a Soviet/US agreement on LRINF and SRINF; and worry persistently (if often exaggeratedly) about what they believe is growing indifference in the FRG towards the EC and a corresponding disposition to yield to the temptation of neutralism and the lure of reunification.

6. With a year to go to the presidential elections, France is therefore in a somewhat pessimistic and uncertain mood.

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