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MY TELNO SAVING 1 OF 8 JANUARY 1988

FRENCH INTERNAL POLITICS

Summary

1. Chirac's formal announcement that he is a presidential candidate marks the acceleration of his campaign. Barre will wait until 8 February. Meanwhile the different elements of the UDF are falling in behind him, but some with more enthusiasm than others. The Socialists have convinced themselves that Mitterrand will stand again, and that he will declare late in the hope that this will enhance his chances. Currently these are promising, and show little sign so far of being dented by the Right's attacks on the early years of his Septennat, or by demands that he should explain what he would do if he were re-elected and what sort of government he would do it with. For the moment he declines to be drawn, hoping that old animosities within the Right will resurface and make the Left's prospects of victory even better.

Detail

2. Chirac formally announced his candidacy for the presidency in a brief televised statement on 16 January. He has therefore decided to begin his campaign even earlier than foreseen in MTUR. From now on he intends to combine the role of cohabitationist Prime Minister by day with that of vigorously campaigning presidential candidate by night. His announcement has prompted a collective sigh of relief from the RPR which has been itching for the race to begin in the hope that, when it does, Chirac will quickly make up the 3-6% by which the polls show that he is trailing Barre, and so emerge as the Right's principal challenger.

3. Barre's declaration is now expected on 8 February, three months before the second and decisive round of the elections. Some Barristes have argued for a greater sense of urgency, but Barre refuses to be rushed, insisting that the tortoise will cross the line ahead of the hare. The last week has seen various elements of the UDF lining up behind him, including the CDS, the Parti Radical and the tiny PSD. Léotard's Parti Républicain will do the same on 23 January and the UDF as a whole will declare for Barre before the end of the month. This sequence of endorsements has created an impression of momentum, but almost certainly not as great as Barre had hoped. Except for the CDS, each of the UDF's constituent parties has a minority that is either sceptical about Barre or openly hostile to him. (The Parti Radical split 66% for Barre and 33% for Chirac; the Parti Républicain may be even more grudging.) Barre now needs to enthrone those parts of the UDF that he has so far failed to reach if he is to extract full benefit from its support. But he believes that he has a substantial following outside the party machines themselves.

PS

4. The Socialist Party (PS) has now convinced itself that Mitterrand intends to run again. His supporters point to the quiet but steady build up at the Elysée of what looks like a campaign staff (including some of those who helped in 1981), and at the provincial visits Mitterrand has been making which have had more than a touch of electioneering about them. At a PS Convention in Paris over 16/17 January, the delegates and party leadership alike were convinced that Mitterrand would stand, and Jospin seemed to hint that Mitterrand would announce his candidacy in the second half of March in the hope that a short campaign would enhance his chances. At present those chances look distinctly good: opinion polls this week show Mitterrand's first round support running at 40%, and indicate that he would beat either Barre or Chirac in the second round (the first by 52-48%, the second by a crushing 57-43%).

5. Privately both Barre's and Chirac's supporters are beginning to wonder whether Mitterrand can be stopped. They wait anxiously for evidence that points to a change in his fortunes but so far none is forthcoming, and they have to content themselves with polls suggesting that opinion remains volatile and that much of the electorate may change its mind between now and polling day. In the hope of encouraging it to do so, they have begun reminding the voters of what life was like in the early Socialist years of the Septennat (when Mauroy was Prime Minister). Their aim is to undermine the image Mitterrand has so successfully projected during cohabitation, of a moderate rassembleur, anxious to promote French interests abroad, and national unity and social justice at home. For the moment, however, the voters show little sign of being frightened by the rattling of old bones.

6. The Right are also concentrating on what has become known as the «For what and with whom» argument: what, they ask, would Mitterrand do if he were re-elected; and what sort of government would he construct to do it with, since there is no Socialist majority in the National Assembly and little prospect of his obtaining one, even if he dissolved the Assembly and called new legislative elections? Re-electing Mitterrand, they warn, could well ensure a further period of cohabitation with its attendant loss of political clarity and authority, just at the time when France needs strong, dynamic government to restore the economy to health and prepare for 1992. These are pertinent questions and the scenario they draw is plausible enough to unsettle some Frenchmen. It is a line of attack which could cause Mitterrand difficulties in the weeks ahead. So far he has offered no enlightenment; and none was forthcoming at last weekend's PS Convention which produced a series of campaign propositions carefully short on what might prove embarrassing specifics.

7. With less than a hundred days to go, the impression is therefore of Mitterrand sitting contentedly tight and offering as small a target as possible, while the Right run faster and faster on the spot. The Socialists' hope is that with Mitterrand proving so elusive, the Barre and Chirac camps will turn on each other, despite their ringing commitments to a code of unity and good conduct. Barre and Chirac are both aware of the risk and have recently been at pains to play down divisions. Nevertheless there is a danger that, as their respective campaigns get into their stride, old animosities will resurface, particularly if the demoralising conviction were to grow among their supporters that the battle is likely to be for second place, with victory already reserved for Mitterrand.

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FM PARIS

TO ROUTINE FCO

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OF 201415Z JANUARY 88

RAYMOND BARRE

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SUMMARY

1. BARRE CAME TO DINNER LAST NIGHT. HE EXPECTS MITTERRAND TO RUN, AND MUCH THAT HE SAID SUGGESTS THAT HE EXPECTS HIM TO BE HARD TO BEAT.

DETAIL

2. BARRE CAME TO MY HOUSE FOR A SMALL PRIVATE DINNER LAST NIGHT IN THE COURSE OF WHICH HE MADE A NUMBER OF SPECIFIC POLITICAL POINTS:

(I) CANDIDACY: AFTER HIS FORMAL DECLARATION WHICH WOULD BE ON 8 FEBRUARY, HE WOULD SHARPEN UP HIS ATTACK ON MITTERRAND. HIS FOOT HAD BEEN ON THE SOFT PEDAL SO FAR TO AVOID CHARGES THAT HE WAS JEOPARDISING COHABITATION.

(II) POLITICAL PARTIES: THE RPR AND PS WERE SERIOUS POLITICAL PARTIES WITH PROPER PARTY ORGANIZATION. THE REST WERE OF LITTLE CONSEQUENCE (A REVEALING REMARK FROM THE CANDIDATE WHO DEPENDS FOR MUCH OF HIS SUPPORT ON THE UDF WHERE MANY OF THOSE OTHER PARTIES ARE GROUPED).

(III) PARTY FINANCING: THE PRESENT SYSTEM OFFERED WIDE SCOPE FOR CORRUPTION AND NEEDED REFORM. HE FAVOURED PUBLIC FINANCING OF BOTH PARTIES AND ELECTIONS. (THIS SUBJECT IS TO BE DEBATED AT AN EXTRAORDINARY SESSION OF PARLIAMENT IN TWO WEEKS TIME.)

(IV) MITTERRAND: HE WAS CONVINCED MITTERRAND MEANT TO RUN AND THOUGHT HE WOULD LEAVE THE ANNOUNCEMENT OF HIS CANDIDACY AS LATE AS POSSIBLE, PROBABLY UNTIL SOMETIME IN THE SECOND HALF OF MARCH. (ANALOGIES HAVE BEEN DRAWN IN THE LAST FEW DAYS WITH DE GAULLE'S DECLARATION IN 1965 WHICH TOOK PLACE 40 DAYS BEFORE THE FIRST ROUND.) ONCE MITTERRAND HAD DECLARED, HE WOULD BE EASIER TO ATTACK SINCE HE WOULD LOSE SOME OF HIS AURA OF COHABITATIONIST RASSEMBLEUR ON BECOMING THE OFFICIAL SOCIALIST PARTY CANDIDATE. AND, ALTHOUGH THE SOCIALIST PARTY PROGRAMME HAD HAD ALL CONTROVERSIAL DOCUMENTS REMOVED FROM IT, IT WAS MORE THAN LIKELY THAT IN THE STRESS OF THE CAMPAIGN MITTERRAND WOULD BE TARRED WITH SOME CONSPICUOUSLY SOCIALIST IDEA.

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(V) POST-ELECTORAL UNCERTAINTY: IF MITTERRAND WON (AND SOME OF BARRE'S REMARKS IMPLIED THAT HE THOUGHT THIS THE MOST LIKELY OUTCOME HOWEVER MUCH HE MIGHT REGRET IT), IT WAS UNCERTAIN WHETHER OR NOT HE WOULD DISSOLVE THE ASSEMBLY. IF HE WON BY A LARGE MARGIN, HE PROBABLY WOULD. IF THE RESULT WERE CLOSE, HE WOULD PROBABLY HESITATE AND FRANCE MIGHT BE IN FOR A FURTHER PERIOD OF COHABITATION WHICH WOULD BE DAMAGING TO THE NATIONAL INTEREST. GISCARD (FOR WHOM BARRE MADE LITTLE EFFORT TO HIDE HIS DISDAIN) WAS HOPING FOR SUCH AN OUTCOME AND ANGLING FOR MATIGNON, BUT BARRE THOUGHT MITTERRAND WAS MUCH MORE LIKELY TO TURN TO CHABAN-DELMAS IN SUCH CIRCUMSTANCES. (FOR THOSE WHO RECALL THE MANOEUVRING BEFORE THE LEGISLATIVE ELECTIONS IN MARCH 1986, SUCH SPECULATION HAS A STRONG SENSE OF DEJA VU.)

3. BARRE WAS IN NOTABLY FRIENDLY AND RELAXED MOOD AND GAVE NO IMPRESSION OF SUFFERING FROM THE FIERCE PRESSURES OF A DAMANDING ELECTION CAMPAIGN. ALTHOUGH THERE WAS NO DOUBT ABOUT HIS DETERMINATION TO FIGHT ALL THE WAY FOR THE PRESIDENCY, HE DID NOT STRIKE ME AS CONFIDENT OF VICTORY: BUT NOR DID HE LEAVE ME WITH THE SENSE THAT HE WOULD TAKE DEFEAT AS A TRAGEDY. HIS ATTITUDE SEEMED TO BE THAT HE WOULD STATE HIS CASE, OFFER HIMSELF TO THE ELECTORATE, AND ACCEPT THE VERDICT PHILOSOPHICALLY.

FERGUSSON

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