

SAVING TELEGRAM

FROM PARIS

CONFIDENTIAL

TO FCO TELNO SAVING 9 OF 22 FEBRUARY 1988

SAVING TO (FOR INFO) EC POSTS, WASHINGTON, MOSCOW, UKDel NATO, HMCs IN FRANCE

MY SAVING TELNO 6 OF 11 FEBRUARY 1988

FRENCH INTERNAL POLITICS

SUMMARY

1. Mitterrand and Chirac have highlighted the Brussels Council as a cohabitationist success. The Barre and Chirac campaigns are well into their stride: the mood in Barre's camp has steadied; that in Chirac's remains confident, as Chirac exploits his several roles of Prime Minister, Mayor of Paris, and presidential candidate. Mitterrand will not announce his intentions before the NATO Summit: the general expectation remains that he will run. The polls show that if he does, he will start the comfortable favourite: but awareness is growing that he may not be unbeatable.

DETAIL

2. The European Council and its aftermath have provided the presidential elections with keen competition for press and public attention, even if Mitterrand and Chirac were quick to claim on their return from Brussels that their joint performance had been a model of cohabitationist virtue. Despite this distraction, the campaign is settling into its stride, with Barre and Chirac holding huge rallies in Paris and the provinces, and jostling for television time and advertising space. Mitterrand ensures that his presence is felt by maintaining his conspicuous absence from the official lists.

3. The mood in Barre's camp has steadied. The impact of his intense campaigning over the past ten days has yet to be measured by the opinion polls, but his entourage is hopeful that the slide has stopped and that it should now be possible to recapture ground lost to Chirac. Barre has been trying to inject more informality and humour into his style, while continuing to insist that his record of consistency and independence makes him «different» (an implied contrast with Chirac). He has also been attacking the Socialists' performance in government, putting forward policy proposals of his own, and making ostentatiously friendly gestures towards the parties within the UDF.

4. Chirac has sustained his usual frenetic pace, juggling his roles of Prime Minister, Mayor of Paris, and official candidate for maximum electoral impact. He continues to mark Barre tightly, insisting that the only «differences» between them are of style not substance (implying that he is the younger, more energetic, more exciting Right wing model). He has also drawn up a balance sheet of the government's performance since he became Prime Minister which the Socialists have been quick to attack, not least its claims of progress in tackling unemployment. We shall hear much more of such arguments in the weeks ahead as Chirac and Barre denigrate Mitterrand's achievements; as the Socialists denigrate Barre's performance as Prime Minister under Giscard and Chirac's performance since 1986; and as Barre and Chirac try subtly to denigrate each other, without wrecking their «code of good conduct». There is already a war of posters presenting the images Barre and Chirac have chosen for themselves: Barre solid, reliable; Chirac dynamic, courageous.

5. Mitterrand has said he will not announce his decision until after the NATO Summit: Rocard has suggested that the declaration will be on 15 March. Other Socialists think it may be even later. Few in or out of the party now doubt that he means to stand. The polls indicate that he remains extremely popular and that his support goes considerably wider than the Socialist Party (PS) itself. However, there has been a detectable note of caution creeping into the articles of some of the more prominent political commentators in the last few days. They still make Mitterrand clear favourite, but they are more disposed than they were to acknowledge that he could be vulnerable on a number of counts: his age; boredom at the thought of another Mitterrand term; memories (which the Right are doing all they can to revive) of the PS government's performance from 1981-84; and doubts about what he would do if he were re-elected (so far he has given no hint). There is wider recognition than there was a few weeks ago that the outcome of the race is not a foregone conclusion.


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