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MY TELNO 363: FRENCH PRESIDENTIAL ELECTIONS.

SUMMARY

1. ENCOURAGEMENT FOR MITTERRAND IN THE OPINION POLLS, AND IN CHIRAC'S DIFFICULTIES WITH LE PEN. MITTERRAND ENCOURAGES SPECULATION ABOUT A CHIRAC/LE PEN DEAL BETWEEN THE TWO ROUNDS OF THE ELECTIONS. LE PEN, WHOM POLLS SHOW WINNING 10 PER CENT OR MORE OF THE VOTE, BELIEVES HE HOLDS THE KEY TO THE RESULT. CHIRAC APPEARS TO BELIEVE HIM: MITTERRAND DOES NOT. THE BETTING IS STILL ON MITTERRAND.

DETAIL

2. TWO RECENT DEVELOPMENTS HAVE BROUGHT REASSURANCE TO MITTERRAND'S CAMP. THE FIRST WAS THE WEEKEND OPINION POLLS, WHICH SUGGESTED THAT MITTERRAND'S FIRST ROUND SCORE WOULD BE ABOUT 36 PER CENT. THIS REPRESENTS A DECLINE OF ABOUT 2 PER CENT ON THE PAST TWO OR THREE WEEKS BUT IS STILL A CONVINCING TOTAL AND GIVES HIM A LEAD OF ABOUT 13 PER CENT OVER CHIRAC. (THESE ARE THE LAST POLLS THAT ARE PERMITTED TO BE PUBLISHED BEFORE THE FIRST ROUND.)

3. THE SECOND ENCOURAGEMENT FOR MITTERRAND IS THE EMBARRASSMENT IN THE CHIRAC CAMP OVER LE PEN. MITTERRANDISTES ARE NEEDLING CHIRAQUIENS ABOUT THEIR AMBIVALENT ATTITUDE TO THE FRONT NATIONAL (FN). THE ROW HAS BEEN PROMPTED BY MITTERRAND'S OPEN LETTER (MY TELNO 340 AND MY SAVINGRAM 18), IN WHICH HE SAYS THAT HE FAVOURS VOTES FOR IMMIGRANTS IN LOCAL ELECTIONS (ALTHOUGH HE RECOGNISES THAT THE COUNTRY IS NOT YET READY FOR THIS). THIS HAS PROVOKED FIERCE DENUNCIATION FROM LE PEN WHO WARNS AT FULL THROTTLE OF THE DANGER OF FRANCE LOSING ITS IDENTITY IN A RISING TIDE OF IMMIGRANTS.

4. CHIRAC HAS BEEN CAUGHT IN THE MIDDLE, FORCED TO CHOOSE BETWEEN SAYING NOTHING, AND ALLOWING LE PEN TO ACCUSE HIM OF COMPLICITY WITH MITTERRAND, AND OF ATTACKING MITTERRAND'S PROPOSAL, AND ALLOWING THE LATTER TO ACCUSE HIM OF COMPLICITY WITH LE PEN. HE HAS CHOSEN THE SECOND COURSE, GAMBLING THAT HE WILL GAIN MORE BY PLAYING TO ANTI-IMMIGRANT AND FN SENTIMENT ON HIS EXTREME RIGHT THAN HE WILL

LOSE IN THE CENTRE.

5. MITTERRAND HAS EXPLOITED THE OPENING, LIKENING THE RPR AND THE FN TO QUOTE TWIN BROTHERS UNQUOTE. HIS CHARGES SEEM MORE PLAUSIBLE COMING AGAINST THE BACKGROUND OF RUMOURS (ENCOURAGED BY THE ELYSEE) THAT CHIRAC IS TRYING TO ENGINEER A DEAL WITH LE PEN BETWEEN THE TWO ROUNDS OF THE ELECTIONS. THERE ARE SUGGESTIONS THAT, IN RETURN FOR LE PEN'S ENDORSEMENT, CHIRAC MAY BE WILLING TO OFFER FINANCIAL INCENTIVES, SAFE SEATS FOR SOME FN MPS AT THE NEXT PARLIAMENTARY ELECTIONS, AND LOCAL AGREEMENTS BEFORE NEXT YEAR'S MUNICIPAL ELECTIONS. THERE ARE EVEN HINTS THAT CHIRAC MAY BE READY TO SCRAP THE MAJORITY VOTING SYSTEM HE REINTRODUCED IN 1986 IN FAVOUR OF SOME FORM OF PROPORTIONAL REPRESENTATION, IF THIS IS LE PEN'S PRICE. (THIS VOLTE FACE WOULD BE THE EASIER FOR CHIRAC TO STOMACH SINCE IT WOULD ALSO FIND FAVOUR WITH THE CENTRISTS, WHOSE VOTES HE NEEDS TOO.)

6. LE PEN'S DIFFICULTY OVER ANY BARGAIN IS IN BEING SURE THAT CHIRAC WILL HONOUR IT AFTER THE ELECTIONS. CHIRAC'S IS THAT, EVEN IF LE PEN DOES AGREE TO ENDORSE HIM, THERE CAN BE NO CERTAINTY THAT THE VOLATILE FN ELECTORATE WILL FOLLOW THEIR LEADER'S ADVICE IN THE SECOND ROUND. THE RISK FOR CHIRAC IS THAT THEY WILL NOT, AND THAT HIS ATTEMPTS TO WOO THE EXTREME RIGHT WILL NOT ONLY FAIL BUT WILL COST HIM VITAL VOTES IN THE CENTRE AT THE SECOND ROUND. A STATEMENT BY BARRE OVER THE WEEKEND OPPSOING ANY RPR/FN NEGOTIATIONS OR DEALS PROVIDED AN OMINOUS WARNING.

7. LE PEN IS REVELLING IN THE ATTENTION HE IS NOW ENJOYING, AND IN OPINION POLL FINDINGS WHICH SUGGEST THAT HE WILL SECURE 10-12 PER CENT IN THE FIRST ROUND. HE MAY DO EVEN BETTER. IN A CAMPAIGN IN WHICH THE THREE MAIN CANDIDATES HAVE BEEN COMPETING FOR THE CENTRE GROUND LE PEN'S STRIDENT ELECTIONEERING HAS STOOD OUT BY CONTRAST. LE PEN'S SCORE COULD BE THE SURPRISE OF NEXT SUNDAY'S VOTING.

CONCLUSION

8. LE PEN IS NOW CLAIMING TO HOLD THE KEY TO THE ELECTION. BY CHOOSING TO TAKE BARRE'S VOTE FOR GRANTED IN THE SECOND ROUND, AND GOING AFTER LE PEN'S, CHIRAC IS ACTING AS IF HE ACCEPTS THE CLAIM. MITTERRAND, ON THE OTHER HAND, DOES NOT. HE THINKS CHIRAC HAS FALLEN INTO A TRAP AND WILL NOT BE ABLE TO HOLD THE CENTRE WHILE APPEALING TO THE FAR RIGHT. THE RESULT OF THE ELECTION MAY DEPEND ON WHOSE ANALYSIS IS CORRECT. CHIRAC IS A NOTABLY AGILE POLITICIAN, BETTER THAN MOST AT RIDING TWO HORSES AT ONCE. BUT IT WILL NOT BE EASY FOR HIM TO KEEP HIS BALANCE, AND AT THE MOMENT THE BETTING IS STILL ON