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INFO SAVING HM CGS IN FRANCE

MY TELNO 480: FRENCH PARLIAMENTARY ELECTIONS.

SUMMARY

1. THE CENTRISTS' RELUCTANCE TO RESPOND TO MITTERRAND'S OVERTURES HAS PERSUADED HIM TO DISSOLVE THE ASSEMBLY. THE ELECTORATE SEEMS DISPOSED TO GIVE HIM A PARLIAMENTARY MAJORITY, WHICH WOULD SECURE THE POSITION OF THE NEW GOVERNMENT. THE UDF AND RPR ARE LIKELY TO FIGHT THE ELECTIONS TOGETHER, BUT THERE WILL BE STRAINS OVER THE LINE TO ADOPT TOWARDS POLITICAL REALIGNMENT, AND LE PEN. THE COMMUNISTS (PCF) AND THE FRONT NATIONAL (FN) WILL LOSE MANY OF THEIR SEATS. LE PEN WILL NEVERTHELESS PLAY AN IMPORTANT ROLE IN DETERMINING HOW WELL THE UDF AND RPR DO. MITTERRAND'S FIRST ATTEMPT AT AN OPENING TO THE CENTRE HAS FAILED. HE WILL TRY AGAIN.

DETAIL

2. MITTERRAND'S DECISION TO DISSOLVE THE ASSEMBLY CAME AT THE END OF A WEEK IN WHICH HE WAS DISAPPOINTED BY THE CENTRE-RIGHT'S RELUCTANCE TO RESPOND TO HIS OVERTURES. MEHAIGNERIE (CDS LEADER) ANNOUNCED THE FORMATION OF THE GIR (GROUPE D'INITIATIVE ET DE REFLEXION - PARA 7 OF MY TELNO 464 REFERS) BUT REFUSED TO CONTEMPLATE CENTRIST PARTICIPATION IN ROCARD'S GOVERNMENT, OR EARLY NEGOTIATIONS ABOUT AN ALLIANCE WITH THE SOCIALISTS, WHICH MIGHT HAVE ENCOURAGED MITTERRAND TO DELAY DISSOLVING UNTIL SEPTEMBER. MEHAIGNERIE AND OTHER CENTRISTS ALSO CRITICISED ROCARD'S GOVERNMENT WHEN IT WAS ANNOUNCED, ARGUING THAT IT WAS TOO SOCIALIST IN EMPHASIS: THIS DESPITE THE FACT THAT A THIRD OF THE NEW MINISTERS ARE NON-SOCIALIST AND THAT THEY THEMSELVES HAD REFUSED TO PARTICIPATE.

3. GISCARD HAS CONTINUED TO SAY THAT HE WILL JUDGE THE NEW GOVERNMENT BY ITS DEEDS. THE CDS HAS ALSO ADOPTED MUCH THE SAME LINE (ALTHOUGH THEIR RELATIONS WITH GISCARD ARE STRAINED) WITH REGARD TO PARLIAMENTARY BUSINESS. THEY HAVE SAID THAT THEY WOULD NOT ENGAGE IN SYSTEMATIC OPPOSITION TO ROCARD'S GOVERNMENT BUT WOULD TREAT EACH PIECE OF LEGISLATION ON ITS MERITS, IN EFFECT PUTTING THE NEW ADMINISTRATION ON TRIAL. IT IS NOT SURPRISING THAT MITTERRAND'S

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RESPONSE HAS BEEN TO SHOW THE CENTRE AND THE RIGHT THAT, WITH A MASSIVE PRESIDENTIAL VICTORY BEHIND HIM, IT IS HE WHO WILL DICTATE THE TERMS, NOT THEY.

4. IN HIS DISSOLUTION ANNOUNCEMENT MITTERRAND DEPLORED THE LACK OF RESPONSE TO HIS AND ROCARD'S EFFORTS TO PROMOTE A POLITICAL OPENING AND SAID HE MUST ASK THE COUNTRY FOR A PARLIAMENTARY MAJORITY ON WHICH THE NEW GOVERNMENT COULD RELY. THE OPINION POLLS SUGGEST THAT THE ELECTORATE IS IN THE MOOD TO GIVE HIM WHAT HE WANTS. AN IPSOS POLL PUBLISHED TODAY (15 MAY) SHOWS THAT 47 PER CENT WANT NEW LEGISLATIVE ELECTIONS (WITH ONLY 28 PER CENT OPPOSED): AND THAT 68 PER CENT APPROVE HIS CHOICE OF ROCARD AS PRIME MINISTER. THE SAME POLL SHOWS THAT IN EARLY ELECTIONS VOTING INTENTIONS ARE:

SOCIALIST PARTY (PS)	41 PER CENT
RPR	24 PER CENT
UDF	15 PER CENT
FRONT NATIONAL	8 PER CENT
COMMUNIST PARTY (PCF)	6 PER CENT
ECOLOGISTS	4 PER CENT

THIS WOULD GIVE THE SOCIALISTS A CLEAR MAJORITY IN THE ASSEMBLY. (IPSOS SPECULATES THAT THE PS WOULD WIN ABOUT 350 OF THE 577 SEATS). A MEASURE OF THE STRENGTH OF THE PS'S POSITION AS IT BEGINS THE CAMPAIGN IS THAT THE SOCIALISTS' SWEEPING PARLIAMENTARY VICTORY OF 1981 WAS ACHIEVED WITH ONLY 37.5 PER CENT OF THE VOTE (ALTHOUGH COMPARISONS ARE NOT EXACT BECAUSE THERE HAVE SINCE BEEN CONSTITUENCY BOUNDARY CHANGES).

5. THE CENTRE AND RIGHT ARE ENERGETICALLY CRYING FOUL, CLAIMING THAT MITTERRAND AND ROCARD HAVE NOT BEEN SERIOUS ABOUT A POLITICAL OPENING AND THAT THEIR INTENTION ALL ALONG HAS BEEN TO DISSOLVE AND OBTAIN A SOCIALIST MAJORITY IN THE ASSEMBLY. THE POLEMICS WILL CONTINUE. THE CENTRISTS NEVERTHELESS SEEM GUILTY OF A HESITATION WHICH COULD NOW COST THEM A LARGE NUMBER OF SEATS. THEY HAVE ALSO OVER ESTIMATED THE STRENGTH OF THEIR OWN POSITION AND UNDERESTIMATED THAT OF THE PRESIDENT. DESPITE THE POLITICAL DIFFICULTIES IN CHANGING ALLIANCES, THEY SHOULD HAVE REALISED THAT, UNLESS THEY DISPLAYED A WILLINGNESS TO MEET MITTERRAND HALF WAY, HE WOULD TAKE OUT EARLY INSURANCE BY CALLING ELECTIONS TO SECURE THE NEW GOVERNMENT'S POSITION. THEIR OWN BEHAVIOUR HAS DONE MUCH TO PROVOKE THE DISSOLUTION THEY WISHED TO AVOID.

6. THE PROSPECT THAT THE CENTRISTS MIGHT BREAK WITH THE UDF AND FORM

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AN AUTONOMOUS POLITICAL GROUP AROUND THE GIR IS NOW POSTPONED. THEY WILL REMAIN IN THE UDF TO FIGHT THE ELECTIONS, AND THE UDF ITSELF WILL PROBABLY COOPERATE WITH THE RPR TO PUT FORWARD A SINGLE UDF-RPR CANDIDATE IN MANY CONSTITUENCIES. BUT THIS WILL BE A SHORT-TERM ALLIANCE OF CONVENIENCE, NOT CONVICTION. THE CENTRISTS ARE STILL INTERESTED IN A POLITICAL REALIGNMENT, DESPITE THEIR INITIAL HESITATION, AND WILL BE PRESSED TO CLARIFY THEIR POSITION DURING THE CAMPAIGN. THIS IS LIKELY TO BE AT ODDS WITH THEIR NOMINAL RIGHT WING ALLIES WHO OPPOSE ANY REALIGNMENT: THE CONTRADICTION WILL SHOW THROUGH.

7. THERE WILL ALSO BE SHARP DIFFERENCES WITHIN THE TRADITIONAL RIGHT ABOUT THE ATTITUDE TO ADOPT TOWARDS LE PEN. THE CENTRISTS ARE OUTSPOKENLY HOSTILE TO ANY DEALS, WHEREAS SOME OF THEIR UDF AND RPR PARTNERS WILL BE ATTRACTED BY LE PEN'S OFFER TO JOIN FORCES AND FIGHT THE ELECTION IN A QUOTE UNITED FRONT UNQUOTE. AT THIS STAGE IT LOOKS AS IF THE LINE AT NATIONAL LEVEL WILL BE NO UDF-RPR DEALS WITH THE FN. AT LOCAL LEVEL, HOWEVER, SOME UDF AND RPR DEPUTIES WILL BE WILLING TO NEGOTIATE. MITTERRAND AND ROCARD WILL EXPLOIT THESE CONTRADICTIONS TO THE MAXIMUM.

8. THESE ELECTIONS WILL BE BY MAJORITY VOTING OVER TWO ROUNDS (THE 1986 ELECTIONS WERE BY PROPORTIONAL REPRESENTATION OVER ONE ROUND). THIS SHOULD SHARPLY REDUCE THE REPRESENTATION OF THE EXTREMES IN THE ASSEMBLY. IF THE IPSOS POLL WERE TO PROVE ACCURATE, THE FN AT 8 PER CENT AND THE PCF AT 6 PER CENT WOULD BOTH BE REDUCED TO A HANDFUL OF DEPUTIES. (THE FN FIGURE SHOULD BE TREATED WITH PARTICULAR CARE. THE OPINION POLLS HAVE CONSISTENTLY UNDERESTIMATED LE PEN'S APPEAL, ALTHOUGH THERE IS EVIDENCE TO SUGGEST THAT SOME OF THE PROTEST VOTE THAT WENT TO HIM IN THE FIRST ROUND OF THE PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION WOULD NOT GO TO THE FN IN PARLIAMENTARY ELECTIONS.)

CONCLUSION

9. MOST PEOPLE ARE SURPRISED AT THE SPEED OF THE CHANGE IN THE MAKE-UP OF THE POLITICAL SPECTRUM. TWO RIVAL HYPOTHESES ARE POSSIBLE: THE FIRST, WHICH I FIND IMPLAUSIBLE, IS THAT THE PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION AND THE POLLS ARE REVEALING A MASSIVE SWING OF FRENCH OPINION TOWARDS SOCIALISM AS AN IDEOLOGY. THE SECOND IS THAT MITTERRAND HIMSELF HAS SUCCESSFULLY PUT ACROSS AN IMPRESSION OF MODERATION, CENTRISM AND LACKING IDEOLOGICAL IDENTIFICATION, AND HAS SO EFFECTIVELY IMPOSED THIS IMAGE ON THE SOCIALIST PARTY (WHICH WAS NOTABLY SILENT DURING THE CAMPAIGN AND WAS PERSUADED NOT TO PUT FORWARD A DETAILED RADICAL PROGRAMME) THAT MODERATES, FRIGHTENED BY THE RISE OF THE EXTREME RIGHT, ARE SWINGING BEHIND THE ONLY

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COMBINATION OF PRESIDENT AND PARTY WHICH OFFERS INSTITUTIONAL COHERENCE AND STRONG LEADERSHIP, AND THE PROSPECT OF MAINTAINING MODERATE POLICIES. THE CAMPAIGN ITSELF, OVER THE NEXT THREE WEEKS, WILL SHOW WHETHER THE SECOND HYPOTHESIS HOLDS WATER.

10. I SHALL TELEGRAPH SEPARATELY ON THE IMPLICATIONS OF THE ELECTIONS FOR FRENCH PARTICIPATION IN BILATERAL AND INTERNATIONAL MEETINGS.

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