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① see Mr Powell's NO TO,
for flavour before the
Anglo French summit.

FRENCH PRESIDENT'S TELEVISION INTERVIEW: 12 FEBRUARY

② backbone 16/11 R. Howe

SUMMARY

1. ABLE BUT SOMEWHAT HOLLOW PERFORMANCE BY MITTERRAND IN HIS FIRST TELEVISION INTERVIEW FOR SEVEN MONTHS. NO OBVIOUS SHIFT OF POLICY, BUT HE CLOSED THE DOOR A FEW INCHES ON OUVERTURE AND ADOPTED AN OLD FASHIONED TONE ON THE CORRUPTING POWER OF MONEY. THIS APPROACH WAS PARTLY DESIGNED TO REASSURE THE LEFT AFTER THE RECENT FINANCIAL SCANDALS AND BEFORE MARCH'S MUNICIPAL ELECTIONS, BUT HIS EMPHASIS ON THE NEED TO TAMPER LIBERALISM WITH THE 'MORALIZING' PRESENCE OF THE STATE, IN EUROPE AS IN FRANCE, HAS NOT HELPED TO CLARIFY GOVERNMENT ECONOMIC POLICY.

DETAIL

2. ON 12 FEBRUARY PRESIDENT MITTERRAND GAVE A LIVE TELEVISION INTERVIEW OF ALMOST TWO HOURS. THE DOMINANT ELEMENT, THE FIRST FIFTY MINUTES, RELATED TO THE RECENT PECHINEY AND SOCIETE GENERALE FINANCIAL SCANDALS (MY TELNO 117). THERE WERE NO SURPRISES ON POLICY OR TACTICS. BUT THE TONE OF THE INTERVIEW REVEALED MUCH ABOUT MITTERRAND'S POLITICAL INSTINCTS, HIS ATTITUDE TOWARDS THE FRENCH ECONOMY AND TO FINANCIAL MARKETS AND HIS PRIORITIES FOR THE FRENCH EC PRESIDENCY. FOLLOWING ARE THE MAIN POINTS.

FINANCIAL SCANDALS/FRENCH ECONOMIC POLICY

3. MITTERRAND TOOK PAINS TO REJECT THE ALLEGATION (MADE BY MANY OPPOSITION COMMENTATORS HERE) THAT THE PROBLEMS OF INSIDER DEALING IN THE PECHINEY AFFAIR WOULD NOT HAVE ARISEN AT ALL WERE IT NOT FOR THE CLOSE INVOLVEMENT IN FRANCE OF THE STATE IN FINANCIAL MATTERS. HE ARGUED THAT, ON THE CONTRARY, FINANCIAL SCANDALS WERE COMMONPLACE IN LIBERALISED MARKETS AND THAT THE PRESENCE OF THE STATE WAS A MORAL NECESSITY TO ENSURE THAT 'GAMSTERISM' AND THE LAW OF THE JUNGLE DID NOT PREVAIL. HE SUGGESTED THAT THE STATE HAD A KEY ROLE TO PLAY IN INTRODUCING FAIR RULES FOR THE FINANCIAL MARKETS AND PLEDGED TO TAKE MEASURES TO DEFEND FRENCH COMPANIES AGAINST TAKEOVERS BY FOREIGN COMPANIES.

PUBLIC SECTOR WAGE CLAIMS

4. THE PRESIDENT SAID HE WAS DETERMINED THAT THE PUBLIC SECTOR SHOULD NOT FIND ITSELF INCREASINGLY DISADVANTAGED IN RELATION TO THE PRIVATE SECTOR. BUT HE ASKED PUBLIC SECTOR WORKERS TO GIVE THE GOVERNMENT TIME TO LET ITS ECONOMIC POLICIES WORK. HE SPOKE OF FRANCE AS A GROWTH ECONOMY AND PROMISED THAT WEALTH, ONCE CREATED, WOULD BE FAIRLY SHARED. EDUCATION WOULD HAVE FIRST PRIORITY.

THE ROLES OF GOVERNMENT AND PRESIDENT

5. QUESTIONED ON RECENT ACCUSATIONS IN THE FRENCH PRESS THAT HE WAS BECOMING TOO ALOOF AND MONARCHICAL, THE PRESIDENT RETORTED THAT ON THE CONTRARY HIS AIM WAS TO ENSURE THAT EACH DEMOCRATIC BODY IN FRANCE FULFILLED ITS INTENDED ROLE TO THE UTMOST. IN THE PAST TOO MANY DECISIONS HAD BEEN TAKEN BY THE ELYSEE. NOW HE WANTED AN APPROPRIATE DIVISION OF LABOUR, WITH PRESIDENT, GOVERNMENT, PARLIAMENT AND PRESS ALL PLAYING THEIR PART. HE CERTAINLY DID NOT INTEND TO GIVE UP ANY OF HIS OWN PRESIDENTIAL PREROGATIVES BEFORE THE END OF HIS MANDATE.

6. AS FOR MICHEL ROCARD'S GOVERNMENT, MITTERRAND SAID IT WAS WORKING WELL. HE CLAIMED TO HAVE BEEN SURPRISED SOMETIMES BY HIS PRIME MINISTER'S QUALITIES OF CHARACTER, NOTABLY HIS TENACITY AND HIS CAPACITY FOR DIALOGUE. THE TWO MET SEVERAL TIMES A WEEK.

POLITICAL 'OUVERTURE'

7. IN THE PRESIDENT'S VIEW THE PRESENT GOVERNMENT REPRESENTED THE ONLY POLITICAL MAJORITY CURRENTLY ACHIEVABLE IN FRANCE. IT GOVERNED FROM A POSITION OF STABILITY BETWEEN TWO IRRECONCILABLE GROUPS (THE COMMUNISTS AND THE CENTRISTS). HE, FOR HIS PART, REMAINED A SOCIALIST AND WOULD NOT ABANDON THE UNION OF THE LEFT. IT WAS NOT FOR THOSE WHO REPRESENTED THE LEFT TO DIVIDE THE LEFT. NO-ONE COULD ASK THE SOCIALISTS TO ABANDON THEIR PRINCIPLES. IF BY 'OUVERTURE' ONE MEANT A POLITICAL PACT WITH THE CENTRISTS, THEN THAT WAS OUT OF THE QUESTION. BUT ANYONE WHO SHARED THE PRINCIPLES HE HAD LAID DOWN WAS OF COURSE WELCOME TO JOIN THE PRESIDENTIAL MAJORITY.

FOREIGN AFFAIRS

8. THE PRESIDENT AFFIRMED THE THREE AXES OF FRENCH FOREIGN POLICY AS: DISARMAMENT, AID TO THE DEVELOPING WORLD (INCLUDING DEBT ISSUES) AND EUROPEAN CONSTRUCTION. ON DISARMAMENT MITTERRAND TOOK CREDIT FOR THE CHEMICAL WEAPONS CONFERENCE HELD IN PARIS IN JANUARY, AND MENTIONED THE FORTHCOMING CONVENTIONAL ARMS CONTROL (CFE) TALKS BETWEEN THE TWO CAMPS (SIC). ON DEBT HE CLAIMED PARENTAGE OF THE TORONTO AGREEMENT ON RELIEF FOR THE POOREST COUNTRIES, AND OUTLINED

X | HIS PROPOSALS FOR RELIEVING THE DEBT OF THE MIDDLE INCOME COUNTRIES. FOR THE FRENCH EC PRESIDENCY HE CONFIRMED THE THREE PRIORITIES OF MONETARY QUESTIONS, THE SOCIAL DIMENSION AND AUDIOVISUAL EUROPE. ON MONETARY CO-OPERATION HE SPOKE OF THE NEED FOR PROGRESS BY THE TWELVE MEMBER STATES. ON THE SOCIAL DIMENSION HE STRESSED THE NEED TO CREATE A EUROPE OF CITIZENS, NOT JUST A EUROPE OF BUSINESS, AND SAID FRANCE WAS DETERMINED TO MAKE PROGRESS, EVEN THOUGH SOME, NOTABLY THE UNITED KINGDOM, MIGHT RESIST. HE SPOKE TOO OF THE ENVIRONMENT, ARGUING FOR A NEW INTERNATIONAL INSTITUTION WHICH COULD ACT AGAINST THOSE WHO BROKE ENVIRONMENTAL REGULATIONS AND SAID THAT PROPOSALS WOULD COME FORWARD SOON.

9. OTHER FOREIGN TOPICS COVERED WERE RELATIONS WITH IRAN (OUR TELNO 193 - NOT TO ALL) AND EASTERN EUROPE. MITTERRAND SAID THAT THE WEST EUROPEANS NEEDED TO PUT OUT LINES TO EASTERN EUROPE, WHILST REMAINING FIRM ON HUMAN RIGHTS. HE CONFIRMED THAT HE WOULD BE VISITING POLAND LATER IN THE YEAR, FOLLOWED BY EAST GERMANY.

COMMENT

10. THIS WAS A CONFIDENT PERFORMANCE BY MITTERRAND. HE WAS FORCEFUL, AT TIMES AGGRESSIVE IN COUNTERING CRITICISM, BUT ALWAYS CONTROLLED. IT WAS A SPIRITED RETURN TO THE POLITICAL FRAY AFTER SEVERAL MONTHS OF SELF-IMPOSED RESTRAINT (SOME HAD SAID ALOOFNESS). IT WAS A REMINDER OF HOW FORMIDABLE MITTERRAND IS AS A POLITICIAN, HOW MUCH HE ENJOYS THE STIMULUS OF BEING CHALLENGED, AND HOW REDOUBTABLE HIS QUALITIES ARE WHEN HE CHOOSES TO DEPLOY THEM. TO ME, HOWEVER, IT WAS AN ASTONISHINGLY 'NINETEEN FORTIES' STYLE PERFORMANCE.

11. A CLOSE ANALYSIS OF THE TEXT REVEALS LITTLE REAL SHIFT OF POLICY ON KEY ISSUES. BUT THE TONE OF PARTS OF THE INTERVIEW, AND IN PARTICULAR MITTERRAND'S EVIDENT DISLIKE AND EVEN CONTEMPT OF THE WORLD OF MONEY, HIS INABILITY TO UNDERSTAND THE ROLE OF FINANCIAL MARKETS IN A MODERN ECONOMY, HIS BELIEF IN THE POWER AND DUTY OF THE STATE TO INTERVENE IN ECONOMIC MANAGEMENT, AND HIS HOSTILITY TO OUTSIDE INFLUENCE IN FRENCH AFFAIRS, CONTRAST UNHAPPILY WITH THE CURRENT GOVERNMENTS'S MORE PRAGMATIC AND MARKET-ORIENTED APPROACH TO ECONOMIC MANAGEMENT AND (WITHIN LIMITS) EUROPEAN CONTRUCTION. NEITHER ROCARD NOR, ESPECIALLY, BEREGOVY, WILL HAVE LISTENED COMFORTABLY. OPPOSITION COMMENTATORS ALL PICKED UP THE OLD-FASHIONED LANGUAGE, ONE GOING SO FAR AS TO DUB THE PRESIDENT 'THE MOST BACKWARD-LOOKING LEADER IN EUROPE'.

~~12. THERE WERE, HOWEVER, IMPORTANT SHORT TERM OBJECTIVES
MITTERRAND'S INTENTIONS WERE AIMED PRIMARILY TO LIMIT THE POLITICAL~~