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Minister

cc: David Blunt, WED, FCO
K S Saunders, Research
Department, FCO
Miss Wilkins, (para 2(v))

CHRISTIAN BLANC

1. The Ambassador gave lunch today to Christian Blanc, recently appointed Chairman of the RATP and a longstanding friend of Michel Rocard. The following emerged in conversation.
 2. Relations with Rocard and the PS: Blanc had known Rocard since the late 50s when Rocard was an «inspecteur des finances» and he was leader of a student body. But he had a dislike of party politics which kept him out of Rocard's Party, the PSU. He eventually persuaded Rocard to merge his party with the PS, and joined the PS himself in 1974, whilst refusing any office. In 1981, when he went to Brussels as Edgar Pisani's chef de Cabinet, he left the party, believing that he should put Europe before national politics. He had never rejoined. Last summer he had turned down a ministerial post in Rocard's government. But he enjoyed taking on special missions and was always ready to help the Prime Minister.
- (ii) Impressions of Mitterrand: since Blanc had directed Rocard's first Presidential candidature campaign (1978-81) against Mitterrand, his relations with the President had been difficult - until recently, when Mitterrand had apparently decided that he was an amusing and independent spirit worth having around occasionally. It was true that he kept a 'court' around him. Blanc did not share the impression given by the press that Mitterrand was a masterly - almost divinely infallible - strategist. There was a lot of luck in politics. But he was impressed by two of the President's qualities:
- a) his power of concentration: he could pick someone out of a crowd of hundreds to give him a pointed message, and had the capacity to step outside events to judge them coolly.
 - b) his political pragmatism: although he was an intellectual, trained to deal in concepts, he had brought the Socialists down from the realms of theory and into power. He and Rocard were very different: Rocard was a Socialist (understood: a man of conviction); Mitterrand was not. Nor was Fabius, his natural inheritor.
- (iii) Relations between Rocard and Mitterrand: at present these were good. Rocard had recently discovered new qualities in Mitterrand and genuinely felt more warmly towards him. It was not certain that the feeling was mutual. Undoubtedly Mitterrand appreciated some of Rocard's skills, but it was moot whether he would leave him in place for another two or three years. That would be to enable Rocard to become a serious contender for the Presidency, better placed than Fabius.

(iv) Rocard's strategy: Rocard could not hope to become the next PS Presidential candidate through the Party machine (his political tendency would always be stuck at around 30%). But a majority of PS members were also elected to a national or local mandate. If they saw in Rocard a popular Prime Minister, capable of getting them re-elected, they would make him their candidate. Rocard was counting on this, which was why his government's current plans to regroup local elections were politically important: they would give Rocard a chance to prove himself in 1992 [regional and cantonal elections].

(v) Chairmanship of the RATP: he took this on for the challenge, at the request of the Prime Minister. Rocard expected the Communists to step up their efforts against his government over the next 18 months. The CGT accounted for 50% of the RATP's union membership and were capable of considerable disruption. As new Chairman and close to Rocard, he would be a particular target and could not afford to make mistakes. At present his approach was to appear in the workshops, sometimes alone, as often as possible. Over time he hoped to build up enough trust to undermine the CGT. The next difficult period would be the end of May when the new automatic system was introduced onto the RER. But he was already working hard to defuse opposition and hoped to be able to avoid a strike.

V. Caton

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3 May 1989



British Embassy

PARIS

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Dear Charles,

You might be interested, for old times' sake, to see the attached record of Christian Blanc's lunch with the Ambassador today. Blanc has promised to show me around the RATP!

He showed much interest in your fortunes - and Ewen and I left him in no doubt as to your present importance! He asked me to pass to you his best wishes and an invitation to get in touch if you are passing through Paris.

Yours,

Valerie.