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MY TELNO 797: FRANCE: EUROPEAN ELECTIONS

SUMMARY

1. UNEXPECTEDLY POOR SOCIALIST RESULT A PERSONAL SETBACK FOR FABUS. SHOULD SLIGHTLY REDUCE MITTERRAND'S MANOEUVRING ROOM AND STRENGTHEN ROCARD'S POSITION. GISCARD'S VICTORY IS A DEFEAT FOR THE CENTRISTS AND THE RENOVATEURS BUT WILL COMPLICATE LIFE FOR CHIRAC AND LEOTARD TOO. RISE OF THE SMALLER PARTIES.

2. FRANCO-GERMAN AXIS ON KEY COMMUNITY ISSUES LIKELY, IF ANYTHING, TO BE STRENGTHENED

DETAIL

3. COUNTING ONLY THE EFFECT ON EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT SEATS, THE ELECTION RESULTS IN FRANCE LOOK LIKE A SLIGHT GAIN FOR THE SOCIALISTS (+ 2 SEATS) AND A SIGNIFICANT RETREAT BY THE MAINSTREAM RIGHT (- 8 SEATS). WHAT COUNTS MORE IS THE IMPACT ON THE INTERNAL POLITICAL SCENE OF THE LAST MAJOR ELECTION IN FRANCE FOR SOME YEARS. IN THIS RESPECT THE OUTCOME HAS BEEN THE REVERSE.

3. THE SOCIALISTS HAD EXPECTED TO CONSOLIDATE THEIR ELECTORAL SUCCESS OF THE PAST YEAR AND TO BENEFIT FROM THE RIGHT'S DISARRAY. INSTEAD, DESPITE MITTERRAND'S AND ROCARD'S CONTINUING POPULARITY, FABUS IMPROVED ONLY marginally ON JOSPIN'S SCORE DURING THE SOCIALISTS' LOW EBB IN 1984. HE FINISHED OVER FIVE PERCENTAGE POINTS BEHIND GISCARD. THIS IS A PERSONAL SETBACK FOR FABUS, REFLECTING HIS LACK OF SUPPORT IN THE PARTY AND LIMITED ELECTORAL APPEAL. HE CAMPAIGNED HARD - TOO HARD FOR THE ELYSEE'S TASTE, RUMOUR HAS IT - ON THE THEME THAT A VOTE FOR HIM WAS A VOTE FOR MITTERRAND'S EUROPEAN POLICIES. ALL THE MORE REASON FOR THE PRESIDENT AND THE GOVERNMENT ALIKE TO WANT TO DISTANCE THEMSELVES NOW FROM HIS DEFEAT. IT DOES NOT HELP ROCARD THAT THE SOCIALISTS DID NOT DO BETTER BUT HE HAS REASON TO BE CONTENT WITH HIS RIVAL'S DISCOMFITURE. MITTERRAND CAN REMAIN ABOVE THE FRAY, THOUGH HE MAY NOT BE PLEASED TO SEE ROCARD'S HAND STRENGTHENED AND HIS OWN SCOPE FOR THREATENING THE

RIGHT WITH EARLY LEGISLATIVE ELECTIONS REDUCED.

5. ON THE RIGHT THE EXTENT OF GISCARD'S SUCCESS CAME AS A SURPRISE EVEN TO HIS OWN CAMP. WHILE THE GENERAL SOCIALIST SWING REDUCED THE CHANGE OF HIS FULLFILLING HIS AMBITIONS ON THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENTARY STAGE, FOR INSTANCE THE POST OF PRESIDENT OF THE ASSEMBLY SEEMS LIKELY TO ELUDE HIM, HIS GOOD SHOWING WILL ENCOURAGE HIM TO PERSIST AT HOME. INDEED, IF CHIRAC AND LEOTARD WERE EXPECTING HIM TO ABANDON FRENCH POLITICS FOR STRASBOURG THEY ARE LIKELY TO BE DISAPPOINTED. LAST NIGHT HE ANNOUNCED ON TELEVISION THAT HIS LIST'S RESULT PROVED THAT THE FRENCH RIGHT WAS NOT DOOMED TO ELECTORAL FAILURE AND THAT THE ONLY WAY TO SUCCESS WAS THROUGH UNITY. HE THUS RE-LAUNCHED HIS AMBITION TO LEAD A UNITED 'CONSERVATIVE PARTY'. FOR THE GAULLISTS, JUPPE RESPONDED BY PROMISING NEW INITIATIVES SOON TO REUNITE THE RIGHT, INCLUDING THE POSSIBLE INTRODUCTION OF AMERICAN-STYLE 'PRIMARIES' TO SELECT A SINGLE PRESIDENTIAL CANDIDATE. GISCARD, LEOTARD, CHIRAC AND JUPPE THUS LOOK SET TO FIGHT IT OUT FOR THE LEADERSHIP OF THE RIGHT, AND THE OUTLOOK IS OF A FURTHER AND POSSIBLY PROLONGED PERIOD OF UNCERTAINTY.

6. FOR THE UDF/RPR 'RENOVATEURS' (CARIGNON, NOIR, BOSSON, BAUDIS ETC) WHO EMERGED BRIEFLY TO CHALLENGE THE OLD GUARD AFTER LAST MARCH'S MUNICIPAL ELECTIONS, THESE ELECTION RESULTS MUST BE DEEPLY DISAPPOINTING. SIMONE VEIL'S 8.5 PERCENT IS WELL SHORT OF WHAT WOULD BE NEEDED TO LAUNCH A MAJOR NEW CENTRE/RIGHT PARTY. THE MUCH-HERALDED RENOVATEURS' CONVENTION IN LYONS ON 24 JUNE NOW LOOKS LIKELY INSTEAD TO DEBATE THE STARK OPTION OF EITHER RETURNING TO THE UDF/RPR FOLD OR GOING OFF INTO THE POLITICAL WILDERNESS.

7. THE OTHER MAJOR FEATURE HAS BEEN THE SHIFT OF MANY OTHERS AWAY FROM THE MAINSTREAM PARTIES TOWARDS A NUMBER OF SMALLER PARTIES AND LOBBY GROUPS. ONE THIRD OF VOTERS OPTED FOR A PARTY OR GROUP NOT REPRESENTED IN THE FRENCH PARLIAMENT. THE ECOLOGISTS AND THE FRONT NATIONAL FOR THE FIRST TIME BOTH EASILY OVERTOOK THE COMMUNISTS. EVEN FRANCE'S BROADLY BASED FIELDSPORTS/GUN LOBBY, WHICH PUT UP A LIST FOR THE FIRST TIME, ACHIEVED AN IMPRESSIVE 4.2 PERCENT, NOT FAR BEHIND THE COMMUNISTS AT 7.7 PERCENT. ARGUABLY, THERE HAS ALWAYS BEEN AROUND 25 PERCENT OF PROTEST VOTE IN FRANCE. IN THE PAST IT WENT MAINLY TO THE COMMUNISTS. NOW IT IS SPLIT BETWEEN SEVERAL FASHIONABLE GROUPS.

8. THE FRONT NATIONAL HAS MAINTAINED ITS STRENGTH IN THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT AND CONFIRMED THAT IT HAS A SIZEABLE ELECTORATE IN FRANCE. FRENCH COMMENTATORS ARE AGAIN BEGINNING TO SAY THAT THE

RIGHT WILL NOT RETURN TO POWER UNTIL IT HAS COME TO TERMS WITH THE FN OR RECAPTURED ITS ELECTORATE. THIS, COMBINED WITH THE GRADUAL COLLAPSE OF THE CENTRISTS OVER THE PAST YEAR, COULD EVENTUALLY MAKE THE MAINSTREAM RIGHT RETHINK ITS RECENT STRATEGY OF SHIFTING TOWARDS THE CENTRE GROUND AND RETURN INSTEAD TO A MORE SHARPLY DEFINED OPPOSITION TO SOCIALIST POLICIES.

9. THE FRENCH ECOLOGISTS WILL MAKE THEIR FIRST APPEARANCE IN THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT WITH 9 SEATS, MAKING THEM THE LARGEST OF THE EUROPEAN GREEN GROUPS.

10. WITH NO NATIONWIDE ELECTIONS DUE IN FRANCE UNTIL REGIONAL ELECTIONS IN 1992 AND LEGISLATIVES IN 1993, THERE IS PLENTY OF TIME FOR OPPOSITION REGROUPINGS. ON THE OTHER HAND, THERE IS LITTLE INCENTIVE TO TAKE HARD DECISIONS. THE GOVERNMENTS'S LACK OF AN OVERALL PARLIAMENTARY MAJORITY COULD LEAD TO ACCIDENTS AND, AS A CONSEQUENCE, TO EARLIER LEGISLATIVE ELECTIONS. BUT IT IS DIFFICULT TO ENVISAGE A COHERENT ENOUGH OPPOSITION TO FORCE THE ISSUE. MITTERRAND WILL HAVE THE STAGE LARGELY TO HIMSELF FOR SOME TIME NOW.

11. AS FAR AS THE FRENCH GOVERNMENT'S APPROACH TO EC MATTERS IS CONCERNED, THERE IS NOTHING IN THESE RESULTS TO CHALLENGE THE BROAD CONSENSUS BETWEEN THE MAJOR PARTIES ON 'EUROPEAN CONSTRUCTION'. THOUGH AMONG THE CONCLUSIONS THAT MIGHT BE DRAWN FROM THE 52 PERCENT ABSTENTION RATE IS A DECLINING ENTHUSIASM FOR THE EUROPEAN CAUSE. SENIOR COMMENTATORS HERE, EG ANDRE FONTAINE IN LE MONDE, WROTE THAT THE RELATIVE STRENGTHENING OF KOHL'S POSITION CREATES THE CONDITIONS FOR FRANCE AND GERMANY TO PUSH AHEAD STRONGLY DURING THE FRENCH PRESIDENCY WITH ACTION IN THE MONETARY AND SOCIAL SPHERES, AND THAT THE BRITISH ABILITY TO FIGHT THEIR CORNER MAY BE CORRESPONDINGLY WEAKENED BY THE RESULTS IN THE UK. WE CAN EXPECT MORE WISHFUL THINKING OF THIS KIND.

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