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RESIGNATION OF FRENCH DEFENCE MINISTER

SUMMARY

1. CHEVENEMENT RESIGNED THIS MORNING. IN A RESIGNATION LETTER HE REPORTEDLY WROTE THAT THE 'LOGIC OF WAR RISKS DISTANCING US DAILY FROM THE UN OBJECTIVES'. GENERAL AGREEMENT THAT HIS POSITION WAS INCREASINGLY PROBLEMATIC. INTERIOR MINISTER PIERRE JOXE TAKES OVER. A GOOD CHOICE: TOUGH, CAPABLE AND HARDWORKING, LOYAL TO MITTERRAND.

2. PHILIPPE MARCHAND APPOINTED INTERIOR MINISTER. A PRESIDENT'S MAN, AND ANOTHER SAFE PAIR OF HANDS. THESE MOVES REMOVE THE WEAK POINT FROM MITTERRAND'S INNER CIRCLE OF MINISTERS CONCERNED WITH THE GULF. DEFENCE COOPERATION WITH UK WILL BE IF ANYTHING STRENGTHENED. JOXE'S VIEWS ON EUROPEAN DEFENCE AND NATO REFORM NOT KNOWN. WIDER POLITICAL EFFECTS IN FRANCE UNPREDICTABLE.

DETAIL

3. JEAN-PIERRE CHEVENEMENT SPRUNG A SURPRISE RESIGNATION THIS MORNING. (SURPRISE AT LEAST AS TO TIMING). IN HIS RESIGNATION LETTER HE SAID THAT HE HAD GONE FOR REASONS OF SUBSTANCE, AND CRITICISED ALLIED ACTION LED BY THE LOGIC OF WAR AS TAKING FRANCE EACH DAY FURTHER BEYOND UNSC RESOLUTIONS (THOUGH HE WAS ALSO CRITICAL OF UNSCR 678 AS HAVING 'TIED FRENCH HANDS'). MOST COMMENTATORS' IMMEDIATE REACTION WAS NO MORE THAN TO REPEAT WHAT HAS BECOME INCREASINGLY CLEAR, THAT HIS POSITION WAS BECOMING UNTENABLE BECAUSE OF HIS OPPOSITION TO THE WAR IN THE GULF. PRESSURES ON CHEVENEMENT HAD CERTAINLY BEEN BUILDING UP EVEN SINCE THE WAR BEGAN AND HIS APPARENT DISAGREEMENT WITH THE PRESIDENT 10 DAYS AGO OVER WHETHER FRANCE WOULD ATTACK IRAQ HAD BROUGHT MATTERS TO A NEW PITCH. AS IN HIS PAST DISAGREEMENTS WITH MITTERRAND, HE THEN SEEMED TO BACK DOWN AND MITTERRAND CLEARLY PREFERRED TO HAVE HIM IN THE GOVERNMENT THAN MAKING TROUBLE OUTSIDE. NEVERTHELESS, CHEVENEMENT WAS CLEARLY

UNCOMFORTABLE WHEN HE AND DUMAS APPEARED BEFORE THE SENAT DEFENCE COMMISSION LAST WEEK: DUMAS DID ALL THE TALKING, AND CHEVENEMENT DID NOT UTTER A WORD. THERE IS NO OBVIOUS REASON WHY HE SHOULD HAVE CHOSEN TODAY TO GO AND JOXE (WHEN I SAW HIM THIS AFTERNOON) WAS CLEARLY SURPRISED AT THE TIMING. ONE MUST THEREFORE ASSUME IT WAS THE ACCUMULATION OF PRESSURES. THE PRIME MINISTER'S DIPLOMATIC ADVISER TOLD US THE OTHER DAY THAT CHEVENEMENT WAS IN A SAD PSYCHOLOGICAL STATE.

4. THE PRESIDENT'S REACTION HAS BEEN TO MAKE MINIMAL CHANGES AND TO STICK WITH THOSE HE CAN TRUST. JOXE HAS LONG HOPED TO GET THE DEFENCE PORTFOLIO. IF HE COULD NOT BE FOREIGN MINISTER. HE HAS BEEN MITTERRAND'S STRONG BUT REASONABLE MAN AT THE INTERIOR MINISTRY SINCE 1988, FOLLOWING AN EARLIER TENURE AT THE SAME MINISTRY. HE HAS BEEN INVOLVED IN THE COUNCIL OF MINISTERS DISCUSSIONS OF GULF POLICY, AND WILL MASTER HIS BRIEFS QUICKLY. HE COMBINES TOUGHNESS AND INTELLIGENCE (HE IS A PRODUCT OF THE ELITE ECOLE NATIONALE D'ADMINISTRATION, ON TOP OF GEORGE WATSON'S COLLEGE AND THE LSE EXCLAM) LIKE ROCARD, HE IS A PROTESTANT THOUGH HIS IMMEDIATE ANCESTRY IS A COCKTAIL: HIS MATERNAL GRANDFATHER WAS THE FAMOUS (JEWISH) HISTORIAN HALEVY. HE SPEAKS ENGLISH FLUENTLY AND IS A (QUALIFIED) ADMIRER OF BRITISH INSTITUTIONS. WE CAN EXPECT HIM TO PAY FULL ATTENTION TO THE UK/FRENCH BILATERAL ASPECTS OF THE GULF CRISIS. WE DO NOT KNOW WHAT APPROACH JOXE WILL BRING TO THE PROBLEMS OF EUROPEAN DEFENCE AND NATO REFORM.

5. TO SUCCEED JOXE AT THE INTERIOR MINISTRY, MITTERRAND HAS CHOSEN PHILIPPE MARCHAND, SINCE JULY 1990 JOXE'S DEPUTY MINISTER AND AS SUCH A PARTICIPANT IN MEETINGS OF THE COUNCIL OF MINISTERS. A 51 YEAR OLD LAWYER, WITH CONSIDERABLE EXPERIENCE IN LOCAL GOVERNMENT AND PARLIAMENT, HE IS A LONG TIME ASSOCIATE OF MITTERRAND AND FABIUS. HE HAS A REPUTATION AS A DISCREET MAN WITH A QUIET SENSE OF HUMOUR, BUT OF INNER STRENGTH. HE IS RELATIVELY UNTESTED, BUT ON THE SURFACE COULD PROVE A SAFE PAIR OF HANDS AT A MINISTRY WHICH IS OF PARTICULAR SENSITIVITY BECAUSE OF THE TERRORIST THREAT, POLITICAL PROBLEMS WITH THE ARAB IMMIGRANT COMMUNITY AND THE PUBLIC ORDER PROBLEM THAT THE LEFT WING/PACIFIST MOVEMENT COULD POSE IF THE WAR DRAGS ON, NOT TO SPEAK OF CORSICA.

6. FOR THE FRENCH FORCES, THE DEPARTURE OF CHEVENEMENT WILL BE ON BALANCE A RELIEF. A WORKABLE SYSTEM OF COMMAND HAD BEEN DEVISED SUCH THAT MITTERRAND'S DECISIONS WERE IN PRACTICE COMMUNICATED THROUGH LANXADE TO THE FORCES. (LANXADE WAS BEING REFERRED TO AS 'THE REAL DEFENCE MINISTER' : IT IS UNLIKELY TO BE LIKE THAT WITH

JOXE.) BUT ONCE WAR WAS IN PROSPECT IT WAS WEAKENING POLITICALLY AND ORGANISATIONALLY TO HAVE A DEFENCE MINISTER WHO WAS ALWAYS ROWING IN A DIFFERENT DIRECTION.

7. POLITICALLY, THE EFFECTS OF CHEVENEMENT'S RESIGNATION ARE LIKELY TO BE LONG RATHER THAN SHORT TERM. HIS ''SOCIALISM AND REPUBLIC'' GROUP IN THE ASSEMBLY ONLY NUMBERS 22 AGAINST A TOTAL SOCIALIST STRENGTH OF 272 AND THERE IS ANYWAY NO FURTHER PARLIAMENTARY VOTE ON THE GULF NOW IN PROSPECT. UNSURPRISINGLY THE ANTI-WAR MOVEMENT HAS WELCOMED THE RESIGNATION AS A SHOT IN THE ARM AFTER A DISAPPOINTING TURN OUT AT DEMONSTRATIONS LAST WEEKEND. BUT IT IS UNCLEAR WHETHER CHEVENEMENT WILL BE READY TO GO OUT ONTO THE STREET AND TO ASSOCIATE HIMSELF PUBLICLY WITH AN UNHOLY ALLIANCE OF COMMUNISTS, GREENS AND THE FAR RIGHT. THERE MUST ALSO BE DOUBT AS TO HOW MUCH WEIGHT CHEVENEMENT WILL CARRY IN THE PUBLIC DEBATE: HANGING ON SO LONG BEFORE RESIGNING HAS WEAKENED HIM. THE TREND IN PUBLIC OPINION HAS BEEN IN THE CONTRARY DIRECTION, WITH SUPPORT FOR THE PRESIDENT NOW STANDING AT 77 PER CENT. LONG TERM, HOWEVER, THIS OPEN SPLIT IN THE SOCIALIST PARTY IS POTENTIALLY DAMAGING AND MAY HASTEN MITTERRAND'S SEARCH FOR MORE ALLIES IN THE CENTRE.

8. SEE MIFT (NOT TO ALL) FOR RECOMMENDATIONS FOR MESSAGES.

FERGUSSON

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PS/DEFENCE SECRETARY

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