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Confidential

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Dear Margaret,

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I was in Paris last week for the first time since the change of Government and saw a number of people on both sides of the political spectrum including Robert Mitterand, the President's elder brother and a businessman, Michel Debre, and Madame Gareau, both unsuccessful candidates for the Presidency; Also de Marenches, the former boss of the French "friends".

You have already met the new President and have been able to form your own opinion and I expect our Ambassador has given you his impressions. But having myself observed the French scene over a number of years I thought I ought, perhaps, to let you have a note of the impressions I formed myself.

1. The President and the Government

How far is Mitterand a convinced Socialist? Noone who knew him before 1958 thought him other than a fairly typical Fourth Republic opportunist in those days. He was always, it seems, extremely ambitious and after 1958 probably saw the only way forward against de Gaulle as leader of the Left. There is an argument somewhere in Pascal that if an agnostic wants to become a believer he should pray as much as possible. The prayers may at first mean nothing to him but by dint of repeating them he will acquire faith. It rather looks as if 23 years of Socialist speeches have ended by convincing Mitterand of the truth of Socialism.

Beyond this he wants to leave his mark on history as the man who transformed France. He is widely seen as a Socialist de Gaulle. Another of his aims is to cut the ground away from under the Communists and destroy the French Communist Party in so far as it remains a pro Soviet party.

Mitterand is clearly in a very strong position. He has inherited the quasi dictatorial presidential powers provided for de Gaulle. He has an independent Socialist majority. This makes the Communists his poodle. He need not worry if they resign. By the same token he can sack them if they are difficult. Faced at a later stage with a breakaway from his own left wing he could always cobble together an alliance with the Radicals on his right. It is generally believed that he intends to bring in PR later in the life time of the present Assembly. The Socialists reckon this would give them and other left of centre groups a permanent majority.



2.

So it looks as if we should reckon on a Socialist regime probably under Mitterand for the next 7 - 10 years. I asked one of my Gaullist friends what prospects he saw of an early return to power of the right wing. He said "None, until after a Russian invasion"!

As far as I could learn Mitterand's health is good though there are always rumours about any French politician the other way. He uses the Elysee as his office but lives in his own house I gather with his wife who is said to be much more left wing than he is. He has, apparently a fairly long established mistress as well but who is kept separately and discreetly.

The economic prospect facing the Mitterand Government is not too alarming. The CGT is muzzled for the time being by his deal with the Communists. His nationalisation and welfare policies can hardly avoid creating inflation and bringing about ~~the~~ withdrawal of foreign and indeed national funds from Paris. But France is better equipped to run a Socialist type economy than most countries. It is largely self-supporting. It has a very high grade Civil Service and there has been a steady interchange between Government, finance and industry ever since the post war reconstruction began. Many of the present leaders of industry are former civil servants. Just now a number of them seem more concerned with keeping their jobs after nationalisation than with resisting it. If the world recession moves towards recovery in 1983 or thereabouts, France must also benefit to some extent. Mitterand will then be able to ~~take~~ some of the credit, at any rate with the general public.

On foreign affairs the President clearly has no illusions about the Soviets. He is accordingly pro American in so far as he is anti Soviet. He appears to be quite firm on the nuclear. He seems moreover to have sold it to his left wing on the original but rational ground that you cannot have genuine neutrality in a nuclear world without nuclear power of your own.

Mitterand also seems to be perfectly sound on the need for a strong conventional defence of Europe. There is, however, some talk of shortening military service in favour of something ~~more~~ along the Swiss lines and including ~~aid~~ ^{3arrin} to the community.

On the other hand Cheysson, the Foreign Minister, is very much a "Third Worlder". Madame Mitterand is also much involved in support of left wing guerilla forces in El Salvador and Nicaragua.

My Gaullist friends fear that the new Government will be much less concerned with French and Western interests in Africa. I would not be too sure about this. Under the previous regime the opposition received very little briefing from the Government on defence and foreign policy. But, once fully briefed, they may well continue on the same lines as before.



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The team is a curious mixture. Mauroy I knew, years ago, as Mollet's secretary and is, I think, very much his master's voice. He seems, to judge from his inaugural speech, to have acquired something of his master's enthusiasm for Socialism. The Ministers of Defence and Finance are reputed sound. Other like Regis Debray are obviously dubious but I suspect Mitterand is likely to rule with as strong a hand as Giscard; even stronger, perhaps, seeing that he has no need to bargain with his supporters in the Assembly.

2. The Opposition

The Right and Centre Right are deeply split. Giscard is sulking in his tent though there is talk that he may return in due course to the Assembly by persuading his alternate to stand down. At the moment he seems friendless and even the loyal Poniatowski seems to have turned against him.

Chirac has control of the Gaullist Party machine but the remaining Gaullist barons like Michel Debre and Chaban Delmas seem pretty hostile to him. Nor do Lecanuet or the Radicals seem to look to him as a leader.

The chances of an early reunion of the Right thus seem fairly remote. It was rather striking that none of the four or five ex Prime Ministers in the Assembly made any serious attempt to reply to Mauroy's inaugural speech.

Giscard often flirted with the idea of freeing himself from his dependance on the Gaullists by forming a Centre block including right wing Socialists. So, now, some of the centre right are looking to a split in the Government majority. According to this scenario there would come a time when Communists and Left Wing Socialists would go into Opposition. Mitterand would then have to do a deal with the Radicals and others in the Centre. Edgar Faure, Lecanuet and even Chaban Delmas are mentioned in this context. It all looks rather a long shot.

I suspect we must count on having a Socialist France for most of this decade. Socialism is likely to make it economically weaker and to that extent perhaps a little less aggressively nationalist. It is likely to be anti Soviet in Europe though perhaps a more difficult partner in relation to the Third World, unless a sense of real French interests breaks in.

In our relations with Mitterand we should perhaps remember that one of the highest points in Anglo-French relations since the war was when another Socialist Prime Minister, Guy Mollet was in Office. Mollet's good relations with Eden were of course largely based on our joint approach to Middle



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Eastern problems. ^{by v} Guy Mollet once told me - just before the Suez operation - that, keen as he was on the operation as a means of bringing down Nasser, he thought its main significance was to cement Anglo French relations and to get Britain really committed to joining France in making a united Europe. This was of course before the Messina Meeting and the Treaty of Rome. Had things developed that way the eventual European Community might have been structured much more to our liking.

It is true that Mitterand and Mollet quarrelled but when I recalled this aspect of our relations with an earlier Socialist Prime Minister, Mitterand's brother responded surprisingly warmly. I don't attach much importance to this, but it could be a useful gambit in conversation with Mitterand.

by v
Julian
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The Rt.Hon. Mrs. Margaret Thatcher

Copy: The Rt.Hon. Lord Carrington, KCMG, MC