

- A DREAM COME TRUE?

With the French general and regional elections now imminent, the key word to describe the present political scene must surely be confusion. This of course does not mean that there is much doubt about the outcome of the elections: even the most blindly optimistic supporters of the present administration are expecting a resounding defeat for the Left. However, a recent opinion poll has shown that a substantial proportion of French voters are completely in the dark about how the new and complicated one round PR system is going to work: many did not even know that it had been introduced. A television campaign will be trying to get



*President Mitterrand...will he make the most of the post-election disputes?*

the message across before March 16, to avoid election-day bewilderment.

What is much more important is that there is also bound to be a lot of confusion *after* the elections. With the change in the electoral system the Right cannot hope for a landslide victory. President Mitterrand, who has the constitutional right to stay on until 1988, will be making the most of the post-election disputes which are sure to arise on the Right between those willing to cooperate, or at least 'cohabit' with the president, and the more radical proponents of confrontation who are already calling for Mitterrand to go in the event of a right-wing majority in parliament.

The Right is already labouring to keep its act together: after unexpectedly long and laborious negotiations, the two major parties - the neo-Gaullist RPR and the UDF coalition - have established an election platform which backpedals on their initial promises of radical change (particularly on the issues of wholesale denationalisation and anti-immigrant legislation). This is probably due not only to internal power struggles in both parties between the more moderately minded 'politicians' and the radical young 'ideologues', recent converts from the extreme Right, but also to the political necessity of drawing a clear demarcation line between themselves and the *Front National*, which has broken with the 'statist' orthodoxy of the French authoritarian Right, and has been preaching stridently liberal economics.

There must also have been pressure not to widen the gulf with the former prime minister Raymond Barre, who has decided to go it alone - with no party organisation behind him and therefore no hope of autonomous

representation in the next parliament - and who has been criticising the dogmatism and the utopianism of the economic proposals of the Right, and above all their suicidal willingness to cohabit with Mitterrand.

Barre, who is undoubtedly the most popular of the Right's leaders, has taken the calculated risk of upsetting Right unity. He has successfully projected a public image of an amiable and competent technocrat (after having been one of France's most hated prime ministers under Giscard), and he certainly realised before the rest of the leaders of the Right that the charisma of Thatcherite radicalism (a key influence on both the Right and the socialist Left since the early 80s) has begun to wane in France. He has thus been lambasting 'ideology', and preaching moderation over the scope and the rate of proposed privatisation and deregulation. In this way, he has been consolidating centrist support among the middle strata whose shift to the Socialists in 1981 made the victory of the united Left possible, and who were the first to abandon the Socialists during the period of radical reform in 1981-1982.

Barre is not, however, a traditional centrist politician, eager to occupy the middle ground. His recent speeches on law and order, his call to rehabilitate the police and his repeated references to the Petainist slogan *Travail, Famille, Patrie* also make him a credible alternative for the now powerful ultra-Right. Above all, Barre is aiming for the presidential elections, even if he has to wait until 1988. This strategy, which fundamentally prefers another two years of socialist administration to the dangers of 'co-habitation' is not without support among French industrialists. Many of them have been quite happy with the unpredictable outcome of five years of Left administration: social peace while French capitalism was being restructured and modernised; the rehabilitation of capitalist virtues and the marginalisation of the labour movement. With enemies like these, who needs friends?

The situation on the Left hardly inspires optimism. The PCF has been isolated and has apparently lost contact with French society: the leadership is publicly hoping not to fall below 10% of the vote. The Socialist party, despite its dismal record, is banking on amnesia and a slight upturn on the economic front (unemployment figures, although still above 10%, have marginally improved and the much fetishised inflation rate is down below the European average) to achieve the ambitious target of 30% of the vote. This

now seems not entirely unrealistic, and would make the Socialists by far the strongest party in France (between them the RPR and UDF can't hope for much more than 45% of the vote) and the pole of a centre left coalition, if not immediately at least after the presidential elections.

Valéry Giscard d'Estaing, some 10 years ago in his *Democratie Francaise*, discussed his dream of a normalised French society, in which the cleavage between Left and Right would have disappeared, the Communists would have been reduced to a harmless 15% of the vote, and the Socialists would have turned their back on the revolutionary rhetoric of the post-1968 period. In such conditions, Giscard argued, France could afford to opt for a system in which centre-right coalitions would alternate with moderate Socialist administrations without the 'risk' of major social or economic upheavals ... A dream come true?

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