

France's Chirac calls snap elections, hoping to save Maastricht austerity

by Christine Bierre

The reasons invoked by French President Jacques Chirac to justify his dissolving the National Assembly and moving the 1998 legislative elections up the end of this month, are indicative of the petty motivations driving the people who are in power, and of their utter immorality. Indeed, their analysis of the economic situation shows that they are perfectly aware of the grave financial crisis overshadowing the world, and that the rotten anti-social Maastricht Treaty is aimed at saving the bankrupt financial oligarchy. Rather than taking steps to solve those problems, however, their sole preoccupation seems to be to do everything possible to stay in power, by hook or by crook.

It is a commonplace in Paris that one of the main reasons for the government to move up the elections, is that they know that if they pursue the present course enforcing the Maastricht criteria, they don't have a prayer of being elected next year. As most media and opposition parties have stated, the government fears that popular rage provoked by the austerity measures imposed in the name of the balanced budget "convergence" criteria will be at its high point in 1998—meaning a major electoral defeat.

Already anti-Maastricht hostility is rampant, even without adding in the most recent turn for the worse in the public deficit. According to *Le Monde*, a confidential report from the Budget Ministry predicts that public deficits could reach 3.8% at the end of 1997, and as much as 4.5% by the end of 1998, far beyond the 3% projected for the end of 1997. According to the Maastricht convergence criteria, for a European Union member to join the single currency in 1999, countries can have a public budget deficit of no more than 3%, which member-nations had committed themselves to achieving by the end of 1997. If Paris intends to meet those limits, it is clear that new and more stringent austerity measures will have to be taken in the next months. If we add to this discontent provoked by the economic policies, the unfolding of all the legal scandals hitting government members and political figures close to Chirac, it is a foregone conclusion that the chances that his bloc would be reelected into the majority in 1998, are slim.

Another reason, proffered by *Le Monde*, for Chirac's decision to call elections, is that the government fears "severe

shocks" in the international financial markets. Even though no government official has made public statements to this effect, the *Le Monde* leak reveals that at least one government in the world is sufficiently worried about the fragility of the bankrupt international financial system that it is calculating policy with a crash in mind.

Abandoning the lifeboats

Beyond these considerations, the dissolution of the National Assembly and related decisions mean that the Gaullist approach which Chirac used to win the Presidency in 1995—the promise that he would strengthen the role of the state in the economy and fight the devastating effects of the economic crisis—has now been abandoned, and Chirac's government has wholeheartedly adopted the policies of neo-liberal former Prime Minister Edouard Balladur. A leading artisan of Chirac's decision was undoubtedly Prime Minister Alain Juppé, who acted after a rapprochement with the top ministers of Balladur's 1993 government: François Léotard, Nicolas Sarkozy, and Alain Madelin. It is expected that these men, all of whom favor a much stronger turn toward the British neo-liberal free-trade model, will be prominent in the next majority—if the government wins the elections. Balladur, who has been openly campaigning in favor of an "Anglo-Saxon" shift, recently met with Chirac and is said to be, once again, "in the good graces" at the President's Elysée Palace.

Juppé, who has been under heavy pressure from the Balladurians in recent months, lobbied for new elections which would vote in a neo-liberal Assembly, replacing the present one, which still reflects the constituency that voted in Chirac, based on his commitment to fight the social unravelling. Juppé, one of the most unpopular prime ministers in French history, is also seeking a kind of legitimacy through these elections, and is very much orchestrating the entire process.

And even though the Chirac government is camouflaging the neo-liberal turn beneath pro-social verbiage, the terms that Chirac used in his address to the nation announcing the elections, leave no doubt that he is preparing a Thatcherite turn toward "less state interference," tax reductions for the wealthy, and more austerity for the poor. "Together," said

Chirac, "we must proceed to an in-depth reform of the state to allow for reductions of public spending, the only way to reduce taxes and social impositions weighing too heavily on us." Taxes were at a record high last year, making one of the few margins left for the government to reduce the deficit to effect massive layoffs of state employees.

A high-stakes gamble

Still, the government is taking a desperate gamble. The broad majority that the government has in the Assembly can only decrease in the present political climate. But the discontent with the prime minister and his government is so universal, that a total defeat of the government is not unlikely.

So, the only question really is whether Socialist Party (PS) leader Lionel Jospin will be able to inspire trust and mobilize the nation to victory. Jospin got off to a good start, exposing the fact that Juppé wants "Frenchmen to cast their votes before three events are confirmed," he said in a series of statements: "the aggravated failure of the political economy of the government, its intention to impose a new austerity cure, [and] the development of scandals against him." He continued, accusing the conservatives of destroying everything, rather than preserving it: "Everything indicates that, even if the right wing claims the opposite, it is getting ready to take a new step toward a hard capitalism" whose "consequences for human beings are catastrophic."

"Why drift toward an Anglo-Saxon model, globalized and inegalitarian, instead of rebuilding the French economic and social balance within our European engagement?" Jospin demanded. More important, the Socialist Party chairman committed himself to renegotiating the Maastricht convergence criteria: "If, in order to stick to the 3% criteria . . . we have to impose a new austerity cure on our country, with our present level of unemployment, the weakness of our demand, of our consumption and our buying power, my answer is no. No, to absolutely sticking to the 3% criteria." Other left-wing opposition parties will also be drawing a bead on Maastricht and the liberal turn of the government; this especially includes the Communist Party of Robert Hué, who since last year has strongly campaigned against the cancer of speculation, and the Citizens Movement of Jean-Pierre Chevènement, who both denounces neo-liberalism and strongly defends national sovereignty.

Socialists still clinging to Maastricht

The Socialist Party economic program published some months ago is anything but liberal: It calls for wage increases, stronger state intervention into the economy, and for tighter controls over speculative activities. However, it carries the fatal flaw of not calling for a bankruptcy reorganization of the financial system, which is enough to disqualify any economic program today, and, worse, the Socialist Party approves of the Maastricht Treaty, does not reject its supranational approach,

and even proposes the constitution of a European government to establish not only economic but also political European control.

Another Socialist weakness, reflected in that program, and reinforced by the recent alliance between the Socialist and the Green parties, is a strong anti-technology bias. The agreement between the Socialist Party and the Greens commits the PS to freeze construction of new nuclear plants and to close down the Superphénix plutonium fast-breeder reactor. Further, Socialists and Greens have joined hands against the construction of the Rhine-Rhône canal, virtually the only large infrastructure project the Chirac government is committed to, and are organizing mass demonstrations against it in collaboration with some right- and left-wing elected officials. These, plus Jospin's recent call for decriminalization of "soft" drugs, overturning the years-long PS hard line against it, will undercut the Socialist impact, among the majority of pro-technology, pro-infrastructure, and anti-drug voters.

The other element which will shape the elections is the division of the right wing: The government's announcement came just as former Interior Minister Charles Pasqua was about to found his movement, "Tomorrow France," as a broad right- and left-wing anti-Maastricht front. Besides a strong anti-Maastricht faction within the "Gaullist" Rally for the Republic (RPR), which includes old Gaullists such as National Assembly President Philippe Séguin, other right-wing anti-Maastricht movements include The Other Europe of Sir Jimmy Goldsmith's familiar, Philippe de Villiers, and especially the National Front's Jean Marie Le Pen. Le Pen's voter turnout will be key in the results. He is in an all-out war against the present right-wing majority and has stated often that he considers Socialist Lionel Jospin to be a lesser evil. Even though Le Pen has little time before the elections, the recent victory of his party in the southern city of Vitrolles is expected to create a positive dynamic for the Front. Le Pen, whose populist anti-Maastricht demagoguery is attracting many discontented voters, estimated in late April that National Front candidates can get over 12.5% in nearly 200 races. This would result in three-way runoffs, setting the majority slate against the Socialist Party and Le Pen, who could easily tilt the balance in favor of the Socialists.

The snap elections also eliminated chances for small parties to run, including Solidarity and Progress, led by Lyndon LaRouche ally Jacques Cheminade. Solidarity and Progress will actively intervene, however, to put forward the solutions to the impending financial crash and for relaunching the productive economy through constructing the Eurasian Land-Bridge. By organizing an international conference on that issue on May 13, which Cheminade will address, the Schiller Institute will be making sure the French elites and French people know that those are the only issues of any real interest in these elections, and the only way out of the crisis for the French nation.