



J E R U S A L E M   L E T T E R

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FRENCH JEWRY & THE FRENCH ELECTIONS - II

The elections held in France on March 14 and 21 were a surprise in several ways. The first surprise was undoubtedly the very high percentage of voter participation; despite the good weather, few Frenchmen took advantage of the opportunity to go for an outing in the country or to go fishing rather than going to the polls. Clearly, the entire public understood that these elections were truly decisive for the future of France. But the real surprise was the victory of the right-wing coalition supporting President Giscard d'Estaing, and the extent of this victory. All the public opinion polls, even the most prestigious of them (IFOP, SOfRES, etc.) has asserted for months, and continued to do so up until the balloting itself, that the alliance of the 3 left-wing parties (Communists, Socialists, and the leftist Radicalists) would prevail. Of course, the left's lead over the coalition in power declined during the last few weeks, and the latest polls showed that the victory of the left would be quite modest. But no poll showed the right winning. Thus, the first analysis which will have to be carried out in the course of the coming weeks, both on the methodological level and with regard to the results, will be an analysis of the public opinion polls; their critics are unanimous as to their methods, their gratuitous assertions, and the effect that their statements can have on the voting attitudes of the electorate.

The coalition made up of the Gaullists (RPR) and the Giscardians (UDF) outstripped the left by 1% of the vote. Why? It will probably be several weeks before we can establish the reasons for these results. However, all are agreed that:

- 1) The disagreements between the Communists and Socialists did considerable damage to both parties. Until September 1977 the two organizations walked hand in hand on the basis of the same "common program" of government. But in September, after animated discussion of the nationalizations to be carried out in the event of an electoral victory, the Communists decided to break off the alliance and to go to the polls on their own program. From then on, they launched constant attacks against the Socialist Party, and in particular against its leader, F. Mitterand. As a result, many of those who were planning to vote left asked themselves: how will 2 parties that cannot agree, that attack each other so viciously, be able to govern together?

The reasons why the Communists decided to break with the Socialists in September are not clear. More probable than a directive from Moscow (which is hardly likely in view of the strained relations between the PCF and the Kremlin), it seems that the PCF had decided to lose the elections rather than winning in a position of inferiority to the Socialists.

- 2) It is clear that during the week preceding the first round of balloting there was a real shift from the moderate left to the moderate right. Voters who had planned to cast their ballots for the Socialists or for the leftist Radicals changed their minds and decided to vote for the UDF. Moreover, many of those who had been undecided

finally decided, after considerable hesitation, to support the coalition in power. This is a phenomenon which is both classic and novel in French politics.

There is always a certain stratum of voters in France of whom it is said: "Their hearts are with the left and their wallets are with the right." These voters are in favor of reform, of changes that would benefit the workers, and of a certain amount of social progress, but at the last minute take fright and are afraid of too radical a change. The fact is that Giscard d'Estaing and the two parties of his coalition sought by every means to arouse this stratum of voters, as well as those who were still undecided. To a great extent, the President succeeded in showing that the economic changes envisaged by the left in the event of a victory at the polls would have plunged France into a deep economic crisis, precisely at a time when it was already experiencing serious difficulties (international competition, consequences of the energy crisis, unemployment, etc.). His economists had even calculated the cost of the nationalizations foreseen by the left and made frightening predictions as to their consequences. Apparently this policy of the governing coalition bore fruit.

As for the result of the elections, a 1% majority was translated into a margin of 88 seats for the victorious coalition. These 88 seats should guarantee the stability of the government for at least three years (the next elections will be presidential in 1981). But how can the 49.5% of the Frenchmen who expressed the desire for a change of government after 20 years of uninterrupted rule (1958-78) be satisfied with these results?

As to the Jewish vote, some preliminary comments are in order. In March 1977 when municipal elections took place in France, political observers already spoke of a "united Jewish vote." As a matter of fact, in certain polling areas Jews seemed to have massively supported certain candidates, basically as a result of their pro-Israel positions. That was mainly the case in Paris, especially in certain arrondissements with heavy Jewish populations (Le Marais, Republique, Belleville, Saint-Paul, and the very prosperous 16th and 17th arrondissements). In anticipation of similar voting behavior in the parliamentary elections, the various political parties put forward either Jewish or strongly pro-Israel candidates. In certain areas where there was only a slight difference in party strength, it is obvious that the Jewish vote could have been a crucial factor, either for the Left, the Giscardians, or for the Gaullists.

It seems that in March 1978 such a phenomenon did not take place: in none of the polling areas did the Jews adopt a united voting stand. Apparently they were incapable of collectively supporting one of the antagonistic camps. How can we explain these differences between 1977 and 1978?

At this very early stage, three possible explanations could be suggested. First, in response to the reports of a "1977 united Jewish vote," both camps make a major effort to emphasize their pro-Israel stand. And, strange as it may sound, both Gaullists and Giscardians succeeded in making people forget arms sales to the Arab countries, accusations against the Israeli government, contacts with the PLO. (Only a few days before the elections, the Secretary General of the UDF declared that the French President had never supported the idea of a Palestinian homeland!) Thus it seems that French Jews were very dis-oriented with regard to the positions on Israel of the various candidates.

Second, in France the Jewish factor appears to play a more important role in elections on the municipal level, when no general political

interests are at stake, than in a national poll. In the parliamentary elections the Jew, like other citizens, has to choose between different kinds of society, and this crucial choice comes before any personal or ethnic considerations.

Third, in 1977 the choice offered was a triangular one: Left (Socialists and Communists), Giscardians, and Gaullists. Jews could for the first time play the moderate, middle-of-the-road Giscardians against the Gaullists. Contrarily, the choice offered to the Jewish voters in the March 1978 elections was not triangular, but bipolar: the union of the left or the coalition of the right. Therefore, the Jewish voter was inevitably led to identify himself with one of the two political camps as a function of his economic and social situation, his age, and his ideological and intellectual orientations, without being able to take into account his Jewish interests, particularly since the two camps proposed a similar policy concerning the Middle East, Israel and the Palestinians, the fight against anti-Semitism and racism in France, etc.

It is clear that when the choice is triangular the margin of influence of the Jewish vote is much greater than when, as in March '78, two worlds, two types of society are brought face to face.

This analysis, only weeks after the legislative elections in France, can only be provisional. But it seems very clear that this time, unlike in May 1977 or even in the legislative elections of 1973, the effect of the Jewish vote was very minimal.

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