

## French electorate demands change: Will Jospin deliver?

by Christine Bierre

As expected, the second round of the French legislative elections held on June 1 was a smashing defeat for President Jacques Chirac's conservative majority, which lost to the left-wing coalition headed by Socialist Party candidate Lionel Jospin. The left obtained 319 out of 577 seats, with 289 seats being required for an absolute majority.

The defeat for Chirac and his prime minister, Alain Juppé, was not only severe; it was a fiasco. This is the first time since Gen. Charles de Gaulle created the Fifth Republic, that a parliamentary majority has been defeated after a dissolution of the National Assembly by the President himself; it is the first time that a majority has been overturned only two years after the President was elected.

The message addressed by the voters to Chirac is unequivocal. First of all, as *Libération* editor Serge July wrote after the first round of the elections on May 25, paraphrasing Abraham Lincoln: "One can lie to one person once, one can lie to some people all the time, but one cannot lie to everybody all the time"! Indeed one of the major reasons for Chirac's defeat was his betrayal of his own program during his campaign for the Presidency, in which he promised to fight against the social dislocation in the country—only to shift to a brutal austerity policy in October 1995. After lying to the voters once, Chirac and Juppé attempted to trick people into voting for them again, by advancing the legislative elections by one year, knowing full well that economic conditions would be so much worse by 1998, that they would not stand a chance of getting re-elected then.

Beyond feeling cheated, the electorate also rejected the specific policies of the government. One of the official reasons for calling these elections, after all, was that Chirac and Juppé wanted to have the backing in Parliament to shift toward an

even more stringent neo-liberal, free-market economic policy, not having any moral qualms about imposing more austerity on the citizenry, in order to bring France into line with the Maastricht Treaty's convergence criteria (see article, p. 4). The right-wing majority campaigned primarily against what they called the "archaic" nature of the left-wing coalition's defense of French republican values, in favor of strong state intervention in the economy. Chirac et al. called for a more "modern" France, better able to compete in the jungle of a globalized world, with a downsized, streamlined state.

### The new coalition's official program

Even though there are many indications that the electorate voted not so much in favor of the left-wing coalition, as against those in power, nevertheless the left did manage to communicate something in the direction of that lost "Gaullism" that every Frenchman secretly desires.

First of all, there is the personality of Lionel Jospin himself. Along with former Defense Minister Jean Pierre Chevènement, who dumped former Socialist President François Mitterrand in protest against the Gulf War, Jospin is the only other leader of the Socialist Party to have quit his ministry in opposition to Mitterrand. Since then, he has been critical of the rampant corruption of the Mitterrand years, and has staged a comeback as a person of integrity, committed to reintroducing principles to the Socialist Party. The son of a socialist teacher in the public school system, Jospin studied at the Institute of Political Sciences and the National School of Administration. He had a short career at the Foreign Affairs Ministry, which he abandoned after the May 1968 revolts. He later became a teacher at a public technical university in the Paris region.

The Socialist Party platform, published some months ago, represents, despite serious shortcomings, a certain attempt to defend elements of France's traditionally dirigistic economy. It calls for stronger state intervention in the economy, plus 1) an increase in wages in order to promote a consumer boom; 2) free health care for the poorest; 3) creation of 700,000 jobs for young unemployed; 4) reduction of the value added tax, which hits the whole population hard, decreasing consumption; and 5) raising taxes on financial instruments and speculation.

Jospin committed himself to stopping the privatization of key public sector companies, including the telecommunications firm France Telecom and the defense and electronics giant Thomson CSF, both of which are on the verge of being privatized. During the election campaign, he promised he would force the Renault leadership to keep the Vilvoorde facilities open.

The Socialist Party, however, is not proposing what is necessary to realize such policies. During the campaign, Jospin promised he would scrap the Maastricht Treaty's European Monetary Union Stability Pact. His platform also calls for certain conditions before continuing with Maastricht: 1) no further austerity; 2) the creation of a political European committee to control the European Central Bank; 3) a euro (currency) not overvalued relative to the dollar; and 4) Italy, Spain, and Britain may join the EMU if they choose to do so. Thus, the program does not reject the Maastricht Treaty as a whole.

Even worse, the concessions made by the Socialists to the Green Party prior to the election, which bound both parties, show that the coalition has no understanding of the link between technology and the necessary relaunching of the economy. Both parties decided on a construction freeze on new nuclear power plants until the year 2002; on the closing down of the Superphénix reprocessing facilities; and on stopping the construction of the Rhine-Rhône Canal.

## The new cabinet

The new government named by Jospin on June 4 represents all the various currents and commitments of the new coalition: the Communists, who gained 39 seats in the elections, have two ministers and one secretary of state; the Greens and the Chevènement movement, who elected seven deputies each, are each represented by one minister.

The two most important ministries have gone to **Martine Aubry**, minister of economic and social affairs (number two in the government), and to **Dominique Strauss-Kahn**, the author of the Socialist Party program, who becomes minister of economics and finance. Scientist **Claude Allègre**, a close friend of Jospin, becomes the head of a super-ministry including Education, Research, and Industry. The Communists, who are strong supporters of large-scale national infrastructure projects, get the Ministry of Equipment and Public Transport. The Green Party's **Dominique Voynet** becomes minis-

ter of the environment and national organization, while **Jean Pierre Chevènement** has been named to the sensitive Ministry of Interior.

Very few Mitterrandians have made it into the government, with the great exception of **Hubert Vedrine**, who becomes foreign affairs minister. Vedrine, who held key positions at the Elysée Presidential palace during Mitterrand's two terms, and who developed a good relationship with Germany's Chancellor Helmut Kohl, will be key in the upcoming negotiations on Maastricht.

## No respite

The question on everybody's mind now is, "Will the new Socialist government betray us, just like the others did?" The main actors in this new government are fully convinced that, were they not to fulfill their promises, the electorate will boot them out even faster than they booted out Juppé. Serge July of *Libération* was again on the mark when he wrote on June 2 that "the extent of the rejection of the right wing, only two years after Jacques Chirac's triumph, has the value of a staggering warning; there will be no state of grace, nor tolerance, nor respite for the Socialists; only a terrifying demand."

Jospin has promised to defend living standards and create new jobs. The only way he can do that, is by taking on the financial markets and the Maastricht Treaty. If he doesn't, whatever his intentions might have been, he will end up as the Tony Blair of France, the one brought to power to make brutal austerity measures more palatable to the population. If Jospin betrays his promises, the likelihood is great that Frenchmen will take to the streets, leading into a period of chaos. This fits exactly with the calculations of extreme right-wing xenophobic leader Jean Marie Le Pen, who, in this campaign, deliberately played the spoiler against the right wing, and favored the victory of the left wing.

The first sign of what Jospin will be able and willing to do will come at the June 16-17 Amsterdam summit of the European Union. Jospin has stated several times that he would, at the summit, promote the revival of the infrastructural projects of former European Commission head Jacques Delors. He also stated categorically that he would go against the Maastricht Stability Pact. If Jospin does not fulfill his promises, a political crisis will break out in the autumn. But if Jospin sticks to his guns, it is the calendar of the euro which will be put into question, and the road opened for a full renegotiation of the treaty. The fact that staunch opponents of Maastricht like Chevènement are part of the government, as well as the fact that the Communist Party, equally anti-Maastricht, obtained 39 seats in the National Assembly, improve the chances that Jospin will take on the treaty. In order to do so, Jospin, known as a sober and modest Protestant, will have to inspire himself with that quality which de Gaulle called "character," which enables the leader to develop courage and will to break with established rules and powers, to act for the benefit of one's nation and humanity as a whole.