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## THE BICENTENARY OF THE FRENCH REVOLUTION

## SUMMARY

1. SOME OF THE CELEBRATIONS MAY BE TEDIOUS, SOME WILL BE FUN. THE FRENCH WILL GRUMBLE AT THE DISRUPTION, BUT THE WORLD'S EYES WILL BE ON FRANCE. THE REVOLUTION IS NOT IN ITSELF AN INSPIRATION FOR THE MODERN GENERATION, BUT IT IS RECOGNISED AS A SOURCE OF FRENCH REPUBLICAN IDEALS AND OF THE STRENGTH OF FRANCE'S UNIVERSAL APPEAL.

## DETAIL

2. 200 YEARS AGO ON 14 JULY A FRENCH MOB STORMED THE BASTILLE AND RELEASED THE FEW DECREPIT PRISONERS. LAFAYETTE HIJACKED THE KEY TO THE BASTILLE AND TOOK IT WITH HIM TO AMERICA. IT HAS BEEN KEPT THERE EVER SINCE. LATER THIS WEEK IN PARIS PRESIDENT BUSH WILL HAND IT BACK (ON SHORT-TERM LOAN) TO PRESIDENT MITTERRAND. THIS WILL BE ONE OF THE SYMBOLIC HIGH SPOTS OF THE BICENTENARY CELEBRATIONS. THERE WILL BE OTHERS, ALONG WITH NO DOUBT SOME LOW COMIC RELIEF.

3. THE PRIME MINISTER, YOU AND THE CHANCELLOR WILL SEE A PARIS SURFEITED AND POSSIBLY PARALYSED BY THE CELEBRATION OF THE BICENTENARY. I HOPE THAT SOME OF IT WILL BE FUN: CERTAINLY SOME WILL BE HARD GOING. HERE ARE MY IMPRESSIONS OF WHAT IT MEANS.

4. PARIS MAY BE PARALYSED BECAUSE MITTERRAND'S DECISION TO COMBINE THE BICENTENARY CELEBRATIONS (23 HEADS OF STATE AND GOVERNMENT) AND THE ECONOMIC SUMMIT (SEVEN) MAKES FOR HORRENDOUS PROBLEMS OF SECURITY AND MOBILITY. THE FRENCH, IN A CHARACTERISTICALLY AUTOCRATIC WAY, HAVE DECIDED TO CLOSE MUCH OF PARIS TO TRAFFIC, AND INCIDENTALLY TO CLOSE THE LOUVRE FOR THREE DAYS, WHICH WILL NOT PLEASE THE TOURISTS. PIERRE JOXE WILL BE RESPONSIBLE IF ANYTHING GOES WRONG. THE DEPLOYMENT OF 30,000 POLICE AND SECURITY MEN AND THE INSTALLATION OF ANTI-AIRCRAFT GUNS ON THE TOLBIAC BRIDGE INDICATES THE SPIRIT IN WHICH HIS MEN ARE APPROACHING THE CELEBRATIONS.

5. PARIS WILL BE SURFEITED BECAUSE ONE COMMODITY THE BICENTENARY



HAS GENERATED IN FULL SUPPLY HAS BEEN WORDS. THEY ARE STILL BEING CHURNED OUT IN THEIR MILLIONS BY JOURNALISTS AND ACADEMICS, ON THE MEANING OF THE REVOLUTION FOR OUR TIME. THERE IS NO SHORTAGE OF EXHIBITIONS TOO, OF VARYING QUALITY. PARIS HAS BEEN SPRUCED UP: THE DOME OF THE INVALIDES MARVELLOUSLY RE-GILDED, THE TUILERIES GARISHLY DECKED OUT.

6. ALL THIS IS TO THE GREATER GLORY OF FRANCE AND OF MITTERRAND, IN EITHER ORDER.

7. MANY SOPHISTICATED PARISIANS HAVE HAD ENOUGH AND SAY THEY ARE ABANDONING PARIS THIS WEEK FOR THE COUNTRY. SOME POLLS SHOW DISSATISFACTION WITH THE EXPENSE AND INDIFFERENCE OR WORSE ABOUT THE CELEBRATIONS. BUT IT IS INCONCEIVABLE THAT THE BICENTENARY OF A CONSPICUOUS HISTORICAL LANDMARK LIKE THE FRENCH REVOLUTION SHOULD NOT BE CELEBRATED ON A MASSIVE SCALE. THE MAN IN THE MONTPARNASSE OMNIBUS, OR IN THE FRENCH PROVINCES WOULD EXPECT NOTHING LESS. THE FRENCH ARE GREAT GRUMBLERS. BUT MITTERRAND'S POLITICAL INSTINCTS RARELY BETRAY HIM. HE MAY TURN OUT TO HAVE JUDGED THE MOOD CORRECTLY: SATISFACTION AND PRIDE THAT FRANCE STANDS FOR A SHORT PERIOD WHERE IT NATURALLY SHOULD STAND - AT THE CENTRE OF THE WORLD'S ATTENTION. THE PROOF IS THE PRESENCE OF ALL THOSE HEADS OF STATE AND GOVERNMENT.

#### THE DEBATE

8. FEW FRENCHMEN WOULD WANT THEMSELVES OR FRANCE TO BE SUBSTANTIALLY OTHER THAN THEY ARE. SO THE INHERITANCE OF THE REVOLUTION WHICH SHAPED MODERN FRANCE - REPUBLICAN INSTITUTIONS, UNIVERSAL EDUCATION, THE NAPOLEONIC CODE - ARE BROADLY ACCEPTED AND SOURCES OF PRIDE. BUT THERE HAS BEEN A LIVELY DEBATE ON WHAT THE REVOLUTION MEANS TODAY. THE FRENCH ASK THEMSELVES WHETHER THE REVOLUTION MUST BE ACCEPTED AS A WHOLE - QUOTE EN BLOC UNQUOTE, TERROR AND ALL. A HUNDRED YEARS AGO, WHEN THE ISSUES WERE MUCH MORE REAL AND DIVISIVE, CLEMENCEAU THOUGHT THIS WAS SO. EGGS HAD TO BE BROKEN TO MAKE THE OMELETTE OF REPUBLICAN FRANCE. MITTERRAND HAS SET HIMSELF IN THE SAME TRADITION. BUT HE HAS PICKED OUT, AS THE KEY PARTS OF THE TRADITION, HUMAN RIGHTS - ABOUT WHICH YOU WILL HEAR A LOT LATER THIS WEEK - AND CONCERN FOR THE QUOTE EXCLUDED UNQUOTE: THE POOR, IMMIGRANTS, THE REJECTS OF SOCIETY.

9. THE BICENTENARY HAS NOT, AS MITTERRAND MAY HAVE HOPED, SERVED AS A MOBILISING OR INSPIRING FORCE FOR THE YOUNG. NOR HAS IT PROVED SERIOUSLY DIVISIVE. THIS IS BECAUSE THE ISSUES IT RAISES ARE NOT THE KEY ONES FOR MODERN FRANCE. BUT ALL THE OLD ARGUMENTS HAVE BEEN



GIVEN AN AIRING. IN THE VENDEE, WHERE THE TERROR TOOK ITS BIGGEST TOLL, MANY RESENT THE FESTIVITIES. BUT BROADLY SPEAKING THE FRENCH, INCLUDING THE CATHOLIC CHURCH, ARE RECONCILED TO THEIR HISTORY.

10. LAST WEEK IN PARIS GORBACHEV PAID TRIBUTE TO 1789 AS THE BOURGEOIS REVOLUTION, UNSATISFACTORY IN MANY WAYS, WHICH SPAWNED THE GREAT OCTOBER REVOLUTION. HE GAVE THE LATTER HIGHER MARKS. THAT VIEW WOULD HAVE PLEASED FRANCE'S 1950S AND 1960S MARXISTS. IT DOES NOT PLEASE TODAY'S SCEPTICAL INTELLECTUALS, WHO ARE DISENCHANTED WITH COMMUNISM. THEY PREFER TO SEE THE IDEAS OF 1789 AS HAVING BEEN BETRAYED BY 1917 AND REASSERTED IN TIANANMEN SQUARE AND IN POLAND AND HUNGARY TODAY. THIS WILL BE ANOTHER MAJOR THEME OF THE CELEBRATIONS.

11. THE DECLARATION ON HUMAN RIGHTS WILL BE CENTRE STAGE. THERE IS A CERTAIN DELICIOUS IRONY IN ITS EXPLOITATION TO BRING TOGETHER FIRST AND THIRD WORLD: AT THE TIME, AS A COMMENTATOR POINTED OUT ONLY THIS WEEK IN LE MONDE, THE AUTHORS OF THE DECLARATION AFFIRMED THE NEED TO MAINTAIN SLAVERY, ESSENTIAL TO FRANCE'S SUGAR AND COFFEE TRADE. IT WAS ONLY ABOLISHED IN 1794 IN ORDER TO WIN THE SUPPORT OF THE SLAVES OF SANTO DOMINGO AGAINST THE INVADING ENGLISH EXCLAMATION MARK IN OTHER WORDS, THE DECLARATION OF HUMAN RIGHTS WAS A DOCUMENT OF ITS TIME, NOT A UNIVERSAL PRESCRIPTION.

12. THE PUBLIC DEBATE HAS DENTED FRENCH EGOISM TO THE EXTENT OF BRINGING OUT THE CONTRIBUTION OF THE ANGLO/SAXONS TO LIBERTIES AND HUMAN RIGHTS. A FEW HAVE POINTED OUT HERE THAT IT HAS BEEN THE UNITED STATES, NOT FRANCE, WHICH OF RECENT YEARS HAS CARRIED THE TORCH FOR HUMAN RIGHTS IN THE SOVIET UNION AND EASTERN EUROPE. SOME HAVE REFLECTED THAT THESE EVENTS, INTENDED TO SHOW THE CENTRALITY OF FRANCE, POINT TO A DIFFERENT LESSON: THAT, UNLIKE IN 1789, FRANCE IS BUT ONE OF A NUMBER OF MEDIUM SIZE COUNTRIES, NO LONGER A MODEL TO OTHER COUNTRIES IN CULTURE, LANGUAGE OR POLITICS.

#### THE EVENTS

13. I CANNOT PROMISE MUCH FOR THE TROCADERO, AT WHICH AN ACTOR WILL READ EXTRACTS FROM THE DECLARATION ON HUMAN RIGHTS, NOR FOR THE MILITARY PARADE ON THE CHAMPS ELYSEES. THE MEALS SHOULD BE DELICIOUS AND THE FIREWORKS STUNNING. THE CONCERT AT THE NEW BASTILLE OPERA HOUSE IS AN UNKNOWN. THE GRAND POPULAR PARADE IN THE CHAMPS ELYSEES/PLACE DE LA CONCORDE PROMISES MUCH. ITS CREATOR, A PUBLICIST, DESCRIBES IT AS A QUOTE MUSICAL AND CHOREOGRAPHIC CREATION ON A SCALE NEVER REALISED BEFORE UNQUOTE. 6,000 PEOPLE AND GROUPS WILL TAKE PART, INCLUDING THE BAND OF THE ROYAL SCOTS DRAGOON



GUARDS, AS WELL AS AMERICANS, RUSSIANS (UNDER SNOW), AFRICAN DANCERS, TORCHES, FLAGS, DRUMMERS, ELEPHANTS AND ZEBRAS. FRENCH PANACHE SHOULD GIVE US MEMORABLE MOMENTS - AT A COST. MONEY IS LITTLE OBJECT (THOUGH WE HAVE RECENTLY RECEIVED PLEAS FOR FINANCIAL HELP).

## CONCLUSION

14. THE FRENCH ARE COMMEMORATING ONE OF THE FORMATIVE EVENTS IN WORLD HISTORY, MARKING FOR BETTER OR WORSE THE BEGINNINGS OF THE MODERN WORLD. THE FRENCH SEE THE REVOLUTION AS HAVING A UNIVERSAL MESSAGE, AND WE SHOULD NOT UNDER-ESTIMATE ITS APPEAL FOR THE COUNTRIES OF EASTERN EUROPE, AND LATIN AMERICA. THE ANGLO/SAXONS ARE LARGELY IMPERVIOUS TO THIS UNIVERSAL APPEAL, THOUGH BRITISH ATTITUDES TO WHETHER THE REVOLUTION WAS A GOOD THING HAVE BEEN DIVIDED FROM THE 1790S ON: TOM PAINE AND EDMUND BURKE REPRESENT THE EXTREMES.

15. VERY NASTY THINGS HAPPENED IN THE NAME OF THE FRENCH REVOLUTION. IT LED TO THE TERROR, AND THEN TO A MILITARY AUTOCRACY (NAPOLEON'S TRAINS WOULD ALSO HAVE RUN ON TIME): TO MASS ARMIES RAMPAGING AROUND EUROPE, TO THE JUSTIFICATION OF THE MEANS BY THE ABSTRACT END WHICH HAS LED TO SO MUCH EVIL IN OUR CENTURY. GORBACHEV WAS RIGHT NOT TO GIVE IT FULL MARKS, THOUGH THE OCTOBER REVOLUTION AND ITS CONSEQUENCES WERE STILL WORSE. BUT EVEN IF ONE IS CLOSER BY CONVICTION TO BURKE THAN PAINE, ONE SHOULD NOT BEGRUDGE MITTERRAND AND FRANCE THEIR POSITION CENTRE STAGE IN WHAT PROMISES TO BE A STRANGE, COLOURFUL AND MEMORABLE FEW DAYS.

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