

Report from Paris by Christine Schier and Jacques Cheminade

Edith Cresson becomes new premier

Most indications are that the change is more of a media show than a real shift in policy.

The much-touted change of French prime minister appears at first sight to be more a media show than a real political shift. Some observers liken it to President François Mitterrand's moves during the Gulf crisis of fall-winter 1990, which seemed to favor peace, but were merely decoys to make the war more acceptable to French public opinion.

True, Edith Cresson replaces Michel Rocard, after having for eight months sharply attacked Rocard's "lack of will and decisiveness," and she calls for "a true industrial policy," based on the development of continental Europe. She has frequently attacked "Thatcherite economics," in the name of "European, French, and workers' interests."

True also, if the Mitterrand-Rocard divorce seems amicable at first sight, it is a real break. Rocard had often made it clear that he wanted to be premier until the parliamentary elections of 1993. Instead, he was dumped in the middle of a Parliament session.

The question remains: Is this a change for real or a tactical move responding to public opinion perceptions and factional warfare within the ruling Socialist Party?

At this point, except for Cresson's pledge to improve the financing of French small and middle-sized firms "following the German model," nothing has come up yet to sustain the thesis of a real change.

A lot points in the other direction. First, the new government is almost the same as the old one. Notably, Pierre Bérégovoy, who ran the "liberal" shift of the Socialist Party in 1983-84, not only remains as economics and finance minister, but takes over the Industry

Ministry, becoming a sort of deputy prime minister in command of all the key economic policy portfolios.

Second, Mrs. Cresson is known to be a pure product of the Mitterrand kindergarten; all her career, and some say even more, is due to the Mitterrand "fatherly" hand upon her.

Third, the Rocard ouster seems to favor more than anything else the political future of Laurent Fabius, currently head of the National Assembly, Mitterrand's number one favorite and prime minister during the 1983-84 liberal shift.

Fourth, no strong statement of a policy change away from liberalism has yet been made; on the contrary, everybody seems to keep the "consensus" profile of the Rocard era, with what is called in Paris a touch of *gauche* (leftism).

Many commentators stress that Cresson is being used by Mitterrand to give the impression of a change at the head of the government, and to calm down the growing ferment in the industrialists' layers, where only a few months ago, there was a strong demand for investment in infrastructure, technology, and basic industry. Cresson has organized her government from her offices at Schneider, an industrial holding company headed by "new industrialist" Didier Pineau-Valencienne, known for his attachment to the international financial-industrialist establishment.

Cresson's husband, Jacques Cresson, was one of the managers of the Peugeot automobile producer, now headed by Jacques Calvet, head of the ultra-protectionist and anti-Japanese faction of the French industrialists' association. Cresson, recently praised

Calvet to the hilt.

Further, it must be stressed that the French institutional shift toward submission to Atlanticism and malthusian financial forces is too deep to be simply changed by the head of the government, especially when that person is a darling of a President who initiated the shift himself!

Still, the Cresson appointment reflects an "answer" to a resistance in the French opinion and industrialists to that shift. That provides some limited leverage, at least momentarily, for a real change. And Cresson's best quality is that she enjoys situations where the rules of the game are broken.

This "voluntarist" dimension of her character expresses itself in her economic convictions, in the form of a "neo-Colbertism" which she constantly reaffirms, and situates in opposition to Anglo-American financial ideology.

Mrs. Cresson has frequently scored the post-industrial society. She criticizes the banks for failing to supply credits at the interest rates which industry needs, and the school system, which is incapable of producing engineers, technicians, and skilled workers.

In her general policy statement, her constant theme was priority to industry. Among the few pledges she did make, one was to "encourage the banks and other financial institutions to orient to productive development" and to keep to the target of doubling the number of engineers of 1990 by 1993.

More concretely, she reaffirmed the importance of the French-German alliance in foreign policy. Her closest adviser, Abel Farnoux, is a former industrial manager and old resistance fighter, who keeps numerous ties with the German anti-Nazis he met in the camps, in a network favoring European industrial cooperation.