

France seeks the middle ground

PARIS — Every year leaders of France's Socialist party gather at Paris's Pere Lachaise cemetery to honor thousands of leftists executed by rightists during the 1871 Paris Commune Uprising. Bitterness between France's left and right still runs deep.

In 1940, France's collapse was in good part due to this historical enmity, so deep that many Frenchmen preferred Germans to their own countrymen.

Last Sunday's parliamentary elections have particularly important meaning. For the first time in modern French history, left and right are being forced to govern together, to share power and to compromise.

France is to have a Socialist president, Francois Mitterrand, and a rightist prime minister, Jacques Chirac. The slim rightist majority in parliament is pledged to freeing private enterprise, lowering taxes and denationalizing banks, industry and insurance firms.

But the narrow victory by the two-party rightist coalition means that French voters have said: "Less socialism, less big government, but no radical lurch to the right." In other words, more freedom without dismantling France's elaborate social welfare system. Whether French voters can have their *gâteau* and eat it too remains a question.

Most important, France's generally well-informed voters have told their politicians to chart the course firmly in the centre. Caution, delicacy and pragmatism are the orders of the day — virtue that will be much needed. No French president has ever before had to work with a prime minister of the opposition. According to the constitution, the president may name a prime minister but cannot dismiss him. The only way Mitter-



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rand can block radical action by the opposition will be to dissolve parliament and call a new election.

How will France's government function under this new, untried system of *cohabitation*. No one knows for sure. Mitterrand still has two years to serve before the 1988 presidential election. He will try to create another Socialist victory, possibly splitting the rightist alliance by accentuating the rivalries of its leaders, Jacques Chirac, Raymond Barre and Valéry Giscard d'Estaing. Most observers here do not think the right alliance will manage to implement its liberalization policies in the next two years.

France is now entering uncharted parliamentary waters. It's vague constitution does not give much guidance in the present antagonistic political marriage. There is even little understanding of how disputes can be resolved. In theory, the president dominates foreign affairs and defence while the prime minister controls domestic policy and finance.

Such a division of power is not without precedent. In the U.S. three Republican presidents since World War II have faced Democratic-controlled Congresses. Now it is the turn of the French, who are not noted for their love

of compromise, to somehow work out a system of political give and take. Difficult for seasoned practitioners, this is a protest that may prove too difficult for French politicians who are more used to polemics than to conciliation.

Of longer term significance, last Sunday's election could mean the final ceasefire in the long internecine war between France's right and left. A struggle that has divided and weakened the nation for the past four generations. It is a conflict that we North American cannot fully comprehend — the only good analogy is the enmity between northerners and southerners before the U.S. Civil War. Since the 1870s, each time the left or right gained power, radical changes in industry, social legislation and society ensued. The oscillation of France from one political pole to the other has deeply damaged its industry and society. As one writer said, "France does not have evolution, only revolution."

True, the French do have a passion for revolution. But perhaps a new sobriety has finally overtaken this half-Latin, half-German nation. After decades of living in a political pressure cooker, France may have at last found a reasonable balance in that middle of the road between free enterprise and socialism that we call the modern welfare state. The near extinction of France's Communist party in the election will add to this balance. If all this is so — and the left-right cohabitation may only be short-lived — France will have joined the other western democracies.

The French could use a respite from political passions. Time to lay the history of left-right hatred to rest at Pere Lachaise cemetery. For those who care for France, the view this week is promising.