

Corruption at Paris city hall

Our correspondent
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Events in the last few weeks have underscored the depth of corruption and disunity in France's political parties.

The fact that city hall in Paris was at the center of a network of favoritism and electoral fraud, a fact long known and admitted by the city administration, has become a means by which infighting and blackmail are being conducted in political circles.

The electoral fraud scandal has been in the headlines since May. First, Jacques Dominati, the assistant mayor of Paris, and Guy Legris—police superintendent, RPR(Rassemblement pour la République)—representative and friend of the current mayor of Paris Jean Tiberi (RPR)—were suspected of creating lists of non-existent voters in Paris' 3rd district.

Then the French media took up the question of electoral fraud in the 5th district, where Mayor Tiberi held office before moving to city hall, which first surfaced in 1997 in the satirical weekly *Le Canard Enchaîné*. This scandal directly implicated Xavière Tiberi, the current mayor's wife.

The scandal has grown since *Le Canard Enchaîné*, in articles published July 4, reported the disclosures of Raymond Nentien, former general-secretary of the 5th district city administration, directly implicating Tiberi. Legal investigations of the alleged irregularities are bogged down, the investigation of the 5th district in particular being halted by procedural motions of Xavière Tiberi's lawyer. Meanwhile investigators have revealed they suspect electoral fraud in at least four other districts of Paris, some of the incidents going back to 1987, which would bring the total to at least six out of twenty districts.

The reaction of the so-called French left to the first revelations exposes its cynical and self-serving attitude. The Greens have asked for the investigation of several right-wing politicians in order to demonstrate their independence from the Socialist Party, according to

Yves Contassot, head of the Green Party in Paris.

The Socialist Party has limited itself to asking Tiberi for more “transparency” (openness) and scolding Green representatives in the National Assembly for talking too much about the scandal.

Socialist Party personnel have refused to attend Green/Socialist meetings to discuss the question and, thanks to the socialist Minister of Justice, Elisabeth Guigou, have slowed inquiries initiated by the Greens.

Certain Greens have even suggested that the distinctly muted reaction of the Socialists to the scandal is due to similar irregularities in the Socialist Party's own electoral lists. The growing scandal has only led to vulgar political infighting in the French “left,” whose internal relations are as tense as the fabled quarrelsome French Right.

New differences in this same Right have not failed to materialize either. Philippe Séguin, a fierce rival of Tiberi who left the RPR leadership in 1999, has returned and is today the official RPR candidate for mayor of Paris for 2001. He has asked for Paris' electoral lists to be redrawn up and postures as someone standing entirely outside the messy influence peddling.

The reaction of the established French parties to the scandal was either to downplay its importance or use it to attack their rivals. However, no party or faction wanted to level serious accusations against the last two mayors of Paris, Tiberi and the current President of the Republic, Jacques Chirac, or spell out the logical conclusion of the discovery of a huge network of illegalities in Paris.

Recent revelations in the *Canard Enchaîné* have made it even harder to downplay the situation. The newspaper showed that the last two mayors consciously tolerated and hid illegal favoritism in the management of Sempap, the private company overseeing Paris city publications after the privatization of the “left-leaning”

municipal press in 1986. The *Canard* revealed that Jacques Brats, the manager of the Sempap, awarded 80 percent of Sempap's contracts to a series of companies headed by his friends and family, often paying twice or thrice the market price in these contracts.

City hall inspectors detected this in 1990 and stressed in reports the “explosive” nature that the public revelation of this affair could have. Chirac, then mayor of Paris, hastened to insist, in a letter at the time to investigators published by the *Canard* on August 2, that he judged the results of their work as having “the greatest importance.” However, city hall did nothing until 1992 when *Canard* published an article noting the favoritism and outrageous prices.

After Brats organized a series of fronts for his favored companies, the system started up again; Paris city hall strangled all efforts by judges and inspectors—who quickly saw through Brats' tactics—to fire him. In 1996 Tiberi suddenly dissolved Sempap, but kept all the documents compromising Chirac.

Judges subpoenaed these documents in 1997 when they began an investigation of possible “favoritism, misuse of public funds, abuse of social property, obtaining and illegally holding public interest, complicity and illegal secretiveness.” On July 26 and August 2 of this year, *Canard Enchaîné* published articles exposing the affair and lambasting Chirac for his inactivity.

Another mystery emerges from this scandal which already has had its share: why did Tiberi, when dissolving Sempap in 1996, not follow the advice of his cabinet chief that the inspectors' reports should also be destroyed?

The answer is not entirely clear, but many have suggested that Tiberi wanted to keep documents embarrassing to Chirac in case it were ever necessary for him to silence the latter during possible investigations of his own checkered past in the 5th district.

It's a thoroughly cynical system: the politicians blackmail each other, each having skeletons in the closet and each holding on to embarrassing details about his “colleagues.”

French politicians cannot, however, be granted any monopoly on deceit and cynicism in this regard. *Le Canard Enchaîné* exposed the details of the Sempap scandal and played a crucial role in exposing the

electoral fraud scandals; several dailies whose resources are presumably far greater—*Le Monde*, *Le Figaro* and *Libération*, to name only a few—have done nothing to expose the scandals of French political life.

They have simply noted the scandals, without making any apparent effort to join or help the *Canard* in its investigations.

The public should also draw from this affair some conclusions about the complicity of the French mass media.

We see here a system of political fraud, economic favoritism and media cover-up, which is a French echo of the politico-financial scandal of the Christian Democrats and Helmut Kohl in Germany.

The postwar dominance of center-right parties in Europe is falling to pieces, but none of the established parties, “Left” or Right can replace the discredited ones since they all are, in some measure, involved in the corruption. The question of working class consciousness and perspective is all the more pressing.



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