

France: Former prime minister Juppé convicted on corruption charges

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France's entire political establishment was rocked with a "seismic shock" on January 30 when Alain Juppé, chairman of France's ruling party, the UMP (Union pour un mouvement populaire—Union for a Popular Movement) mayor of the city of Bordeaux and former French prime minister, was convicted in the Nanterre law court in Paris for "the use of public office for personal ends." He received an 18-month suspended jail sentence and loss of civic rights for five years, which automatically bars him from holding or running for public office for 10 years.

Despite a promise that he would immediately retire from politics if found guilty as charged, Juppé immediately filed an appeal, which means that his sentence will be held in abeyance for about a year while the legal procedures are carried out. At the time of writing, he had not announced his withdrawal from public life.

Charged both as former general secretary of the RPR (president Chirac's party, the Gaullist Rassemblement pour la république, one of the predecessors of the UMP) from 1988 to 1995 and deputy mayor in charge of finance at Paris City Hall (1983-1995), the actual misdemeanours for which Juppé was convicted are in connection with the staffing of the RPR with seven "fictitious employees" on the payroll of the city of Paris. Jacques Chirac was the mayor of Paris while Juppé was RPR treasurer.

Twenty-six other people were on trial with Juppé. Seven businessmen guilty of having provided employees to staff the RPR were released. Thirteen others were given six-month suspended sentences. Louise-Yvonne Cassetta, former RPR financial administrator and fund manager, was given a 14-month suspended jail sentence. In many cases the practise was to force businessmen to provide the RPR with resources under threat of being passed over in the share-out of lucrative contracts.

The one person who was not on trial was Jacques Chirac, Juppé's immediate boss throughout the period of the illegal activities. As president of the Republic he enjoys immunity. Jean-Michel Helvig comments ironically in *Libération* (January 31) on "the harshness of this world where the most

responsible people are not found guilty" and many commentators are referring to Juppé as the "fuse" which blows to protect the main object—the fall guy for Chirac. Helvig asks: "Did the present chairman of the UMP thus 'pay for the current untouchable president of the Republic'?"

The three judges explicitly refused to accede to Juppé's request that the sentence would not involve ineligibility from holding office and in their judgement issued a damning commentary on Juppé's conduct: "Acting in this way Alain Juppé, while holding elected public office, betrayed the confidence of the sovereign people ... in order to obtain staff whom he thought were needed for RPR activities he deliberately chose a certain efficiency by taking recourse to illegal arrangements.... Alain Juppé acted knowingly to his own direct or indirect advantage. This represents an abuse of office."

The judgement continued: "The values of the Republic and the values of public service are at the heart of the teaching dispensed at the great schools (elite universities—les grandes écoles) of the Republic ... it was precisely in these that Alain Juppé was trained and educated and subsequently he served as a senior civil servant, then played an eminent role in political life." Every one knows that all these comments apply with equal if not greater force to the president of the Republic.

This conviction is only the tip of the iceberg of the corruption of which Alain Juppé and Jacques Chirac have been accused. This involves 14 million francs worth of refreshments for the personal use of the Chirac couple. There are also the approximately 60 "fictitious employees" paid for by the Paris town hall as staffers for RPR parliamentary cronies of Chirac or employed at Chirac's office in Ussel. There is also the case of the municipal housing commissions for contracts to refurbish the lifts, which are caught up in the coils of the legal system, and the commissions for contracts for building lycées (high schools) in Ile-de-France, the Paris region, where the Socialist Party is also involved. Another element of this case is the

payments in cash for costly trips for Chirac and his family and friends. Legal technicalities have kept Juppé and Chirac from being brought to trial on these misdemeanours.

The comments of collaborators and supporters and friends of Juppé give an indication of the diseased personal and ethical atmosphere and relationships among political circles in France. Prime Minister Jean-Pierre Raffarin declared that the judgement was “provisional” and that “France’s public service” needed Juppé. The chairman of the National Assembly, François Baroin, said he was “convinced” that Juppé “would continue to serve.” Eric Woerth, UMP deputy for the Oise department, opined that “the personal honesty of Alain Juppé had never been questioned.” Commenting on the judges’ verdict, he added: “It’s unfair of them to do their work in this way. The voters should be allowed to decide.” Perhaps most revealing was the remark made on television, directly to the camera, by a UMP member coming out of a meeting: “I didn’t expect that, I thought that the judicial system would find some kind of wangle.”

The point has been made that the very people who appeal for clemency and virtual immunity for the elite are the very same who are supporting the strengthening of the repressive powers of the state embodied in the proposals of Dominique Perben, the justice minister, known as Perben II. The measures proposed—while greatly enhancing the powers of the police to crack down on working class youth, and weakening habeas corpus and the rights of those arrested—make no reference to white-collar crime and financial malpractices, exactly the area in which Chirac and Juppé are involved.

The Juppé verdict reveals a deep-going culture of corruption in political life at the highest levels dating back to the Mitterrand years and beyond and spreading over into foreign policy, particularly in Africa, as the Elf affair has revealed. [See “Elf verdicts reveal state corruption at highest levels”]

Even now judicial proceedings are ongoing in relation to \$5 million worth of illicit funds received by Jean-Charles Marchiani, a high-ranking servant of Gaullism in clandestine dealings in Nigeria. Recent indictments of politicians for similar crimes as those of Chirac and Juppé concern UMP, Socialist Party, Left Republican and far-right politicians.

Cynics used to say that the only crime was to be caught. In these circles, the cynicism has reached such depths that even to be found out is no longer a crime: you just tough it out and try to bend the judicial system. This is the same outlook as Bush and Blair, caught lying over the existence of weapons of mass destruction as a justification for the colonisation of Iraq, and rejoicing over Lord Hutton’s whitewash.

The judges in the Juppé trial, much to the surprise and

dismay of the political establishment, had the courage to expose “the betrayal of the confidence of the sovereign people.”

A common feature of judges investigating the criminal activities of top Gaullists and Mitterrandists is the mafia tactics used to frighten them off. In the case of Elf, Judge Eva Joly was placed under virtually permanent police surveillance and a number of crucial witnesses died under highly suspicious circumstances. Similarly, the judges in the Juppé case have been subjected to break-ins at their Nanterre offices, hacking into their office computers and death threats. They have been forced to record sensitive documents in personal computers, which cannot be tampered with.

The reaction of opposition parties is quite muted, as they have not been exempt from such criminal proceedings. The UMP, a coalition of right-wing parties of which Juppé was the architect, is under severe strain. It was formed to fight the legislative elections after Chirac’s victory in the presidential elections of 2002, with the support of the entire left. This included the left radicals of the LCR (Ligue Communiste Révolutionnaire), the PT (Parti des Travailleurs) and LO (Lutte Ouvrière), who rejected the WSWs proposal for an active boycott in the run-off between the two bourgeois politicians, Jacques Chirac and Jean-Marie Le Pen.

No political advantage has been registered for the left in this affair, but the presidential ambitions of Nicolas Sarkozy—the minister of the interior who bases his entire political reputation on dealing with France’s deepening social crisis by an ever greater reinforcement of the state repressive apparatus—have received a powerful boost. Le Pen is also likely to gain by posing as Mr. Clean in the forthcoming regional elections in March and the European elections in June.

Fearful of the stimulus that it might give to a mass movement from below against the existing order, no politicians have called for the resignation of Chirac and the Raffarin government.



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