

Greece's reforms

Just in time?

ATHENS

Can Greece's prime minister, Costas Simitis, hold on to power?

MOST Greek politicians still believe a burst of pre-election spending is the best way to win over wavering voters. In spite of his modernising European leanings, Costas Simitis, the prime minister, is no exception. What is new is his timing.

A general election is not due until April next year, but Mr Simitis's Pan-Hellenic Socialist Movement, better known as Pasok, is already campaigning as if it were imminent. First Mr Simitis announced a welfare package costing €2.3 billion (\$2.6 billion) to appeal to grumpy pensioners, farmers and women who have difficulty finding jobs. Then, on September 10th, he launched a "convergence charter". Making a rare appearance live on television, he brandished a glossy handbook packed with details of Pasok's plans to raise Greek incomes from their present 70% of the European Union's average to 80% by 2008.

The charter has something for everyone: lower taxes for businesses and high earners, less spending on defence (now that Greece is on friendlier terms with its old enemy, Turkey) and more on education, pensions, training and job creation. Such plans would probably cost some €7.7 billion to carry out. Cutting unemployment from 8.9% to 6% is a priority, says Mr Simitis. His government will even subsidise rents for families willing to move to places where there are more jobs.

The plan optimistically banks on the economy's continuing to grow by around 4% a year, even when next August's Olympic games are over and the current stream of hand-outs from Brussels slows to a trickle, as funds are diverted to poorer new EU members from central Europe. Moreover, inward investment remains small (Libya got more last year), largely because of red tape and officials wanting bribes.

Education in France

The bottom line

PARIS

Should parents smack their children? The great debate, in French

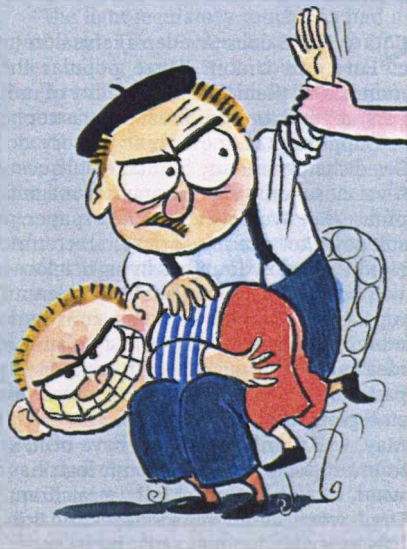
EVER wondered why French children are so unnaturally well-behaved in restaurants? Could the liberal use by French parents of a firm smack be responsible? According to one poll, 84% of them admit to smacking their children, a practice banned in countries from Sweden to Germany, and 51% say they do so often.

The French like to appear baffled, even amused, by others' efforts to ban the habit. A recent British move to outlaw smacking by child-minders made *Le Figaro's* front page. Certainly, there is no taboo against smacking in public: many a harassed parent can be seen unapologetically slapping a tot in a park or supermarket. It is part of the repertoire of unsentimental child-rearing practices that set France apart from the indulgent child-centric American tradition. Surely, say the French, parents can be trusted to know the difference between the odd slap and repeated physical abuse?

This complacency, however, argue increasingly vocal child-protection groups, masks a serious problem. A culture that legitimises smacking can encourage the concealment of graver abuse. In 2001, 1.9m calls were made to an emergency childline service. Last week, Christian Jacob, the minister for the family, announced the setting up of an institute for child mistreatment. It will gather figures on the problem, assess early-warning policies, and consider whether to let child-protection agencies take civil action against parents suspected of violence. A television awareness campaign, which shows children hitting and shouting at a recalcitrant doll

they are play-feeding, and carries the slogan "Being a parent is not child's play", will also be screened.

Some campaigners want more. How is mistreatment to be defined? No Slapping No Smacking, an organisation set up in 1998, wants corporal punishment in the home outlawed. Its head, Dr Jacqueline Cornet, argues that smacking, however occasional, undermines children's confidence, weakens their emotional relationships, and encourages the use of violence to resolve disputes. Even French women's magazines and child-rearing books are beginning to counsel against the practice. "A child is not a puppy to be trained", advises a recent issue of *Elle* magazine. Stand by for rowdier meal times in the brasserie.



Pollsters say about 20% of Greek voters are floaters who make up their minds only a few weeks before polling day. Still, Mr Simitis's early start may pay off. The first poll published after the unveiling of his convergence charter suggested it had gone down well. Pasok was trailing New Democracy, the right-of-centre opposition, by just under seven percentage points, against almost ten early this year.

Pasok has other ways to win people back. Michalis Chrysohoides, its new secretary-general, is trying to give the party a fresh look. Its die-hard Marxists and its nationalist faction are being shunted aside in favour of younger candidates with a softer, social-democratic image. Mr Simitis will appear more often on television, cutting ribbons around Athens

as sports venues for the Olympics and more sections of a motorway are opened.

Will it work? After holding power for 19 of the past 22 years, Pasok may be due for a spell in opposition. Many of its old guard are unpopular, but Mr Simitis is still considered a safe pair of hands. Voters may be wary of switching just before the Olympics, which are seen as a test of Greece's credentials as a serious player in Europe.

Costas Karamanlis, the New Democracy leader, and his team are better than they used to be at picking holes in Pasok's grandiose schemes. But the latest announcements have thrown them into disarray. Six months ago they were expecting Pasok to fall, as one adviser put it, like a ripe fruit from the tree. Now Mr Simitis has offered a few plums of his own. ■