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Hesitant Paris takes over EEC baton

By John Wyles in Brussels

HAD THE hopes of midsummer been realised, the European Community would have been very much more at peace with itself when Greece hands over the presidency of the Council of Ministers to France next Sunday.

Sadly, July's optimism crumbled into the dry dust of disillusion at the Athens summit in early December. Now President Francois Mitterrand and M Claude Cheysson, his Foreign Minister, have six months to try to steer the Ten towards urgent agricultural and budgetary measures.

How they will do it is a complete mystery. "I have the strong impression of confusion and uncertainty in Paris," said one senior ambassador to the Community who, like everyone else, is looking to M Cheysson's policy declaration to the European Parliament on January 18 to shed a little light.

Confusion in Paris is understandable because France's responsibilities to the Community have to be balanced against the need to defend and further national interests.

With the EEC budget in crisis because of a shortage of funds, other member-states look to the president of the Council of Ministers to organise the work and help develop the compromises most likely to yield the earliest and the fullest agreements.

But these must cover issues of vital importance to France. Achieving the necessary economies in the common agricultural policy could unleash the political wrath of France's turbulent farmers. Granting Britain a permanent solution to its EEC budget problem will involve a possibly painful bending to Mrs Margaret Thatcher's will. Clearing the way for Spanish and Portuguese membership will cost the French Socialists support among the peasants in the south.

Other member-states wonder, therefore, whether France's desire to cajole and persuade them towards agreement will not be qualified. Perhaps Paris will prefer a final negotiation once the French presidency is over and next June's elections to the European Parliament are out of the way?

Greece, meanwhile, hands over the responsibilities of the presidency with evident relief, fatigue and, among its diplomats, a sense of a job well done. The failure of the Athens summit was not a Greek failure, for all governments were responsible.

At a more humdrum level, Greek ministers and officials overcame their lack of experience and in-depth expertise to produce creditable and occasionally, first class, handling of Community business.

Mr Constantin Simitis, the Greek Minister for Agriculture, made a name for himself as a skilful chairman able to seize opportunities which led to badly-needed agreements on new arrangements for Mediterranean products and a share-out of the North Sea herring catch.

Mr Grigorias Varfis, the Minister for European Affairs, in a sense carried the Greek presidency by assuming total responsibility for the special negotiations leading up to the summit. He was not rewarded by a final success but it is doubtful whether anyone else would have been.

His role was to keep Greek foreign policy pure from infection from the multilateral approach required by EEC political co-operation. Thus, he prevented a common condemnation of the shooting down of the South Korean airliner, and after that the Community's political co-operation went into deep freeze.

Nevertheless, the Athens Government displayed a shrewd judgment of the possibilities and limitations of the EEC presidency.

Six months is a painfully short time in Community affairs to make much of an impact, given the poverty of political will to tackle the key agricultural and budgetary problems. Prime Minister Andreas Papandreou and his Government used the presidency, therefore, as a mirror from which to reflect an image of themselves back to the Greek people. Parading as the "leaders of Europe," no government can ever have made more effort to wring the maximum domestic political advantage out of the EEC presidency.

The skill of the exercise derived from the fact that at no time did Mr Papandreou and his ministers depart from their official view that the Community has serious shortcomings which have a particularly adverse impact on Greece.

No such doubts exist in the case of France, although President Mitterrand has hinted strongly over the past year or so that he would like to see a rather different kind of Community developing over the next decade.

In seeking to preside over the important agreements which eluded the Athens summit, he may, in his Gaullist way, be attracted by the idea of laying the foundation stone of the "new" Community.