

# Blair to EU: We can't go on like this

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TONY BLAIR called for fundamental reforms to the way the European Union does business yesterday after five days of chaotic wrangling in Nice almost ended in a failure that would have been a massive blow to its credibility.

The Prime Minister gave notice that he backed radical changes to the decision-making process, including more extensive preparatory discussions and an end to the "travelling circus" system under which summits are held in obscure locations.

He wants to stop leaders being forced to take crucial decisions affecting the future of the EU in the middle of the night, often trying to wear each other down through sleep deprivation.

Speaking yesterday after only two hours' sleep before he returned to London to face the Commons, the Prime Minister said: "We cannot do business like this in the future." It was not until 4.25am that Mr Blair and other leaders staggered out of the Acropolis convention centre having agreed a treaty that fell well below the hopes of many EU countries, but at least managed to keep on track the process of enlarging the organisation to as many as 27 members.

With the small states fighting through the early hours for a better voting deal than



that on offer, the prospects of a successful outcome faltered throughout the night until Belgium was bought off with improved terms for applicants. Mr Blair's spokesman said: "People were pretty exhausted, hungry and fractious, nobody would have left the room thinking that was a brilliant way to conduct negotiations."

The Government also signalled its support for an end to the "rituals and grandstanding" of summits, in which the state holding the EU presidency seeks to showcase its attractions by hosting negotiations in attractive towns like Nice. Mr Blair's spokesman said that such events would be more effective if they were held in just two or three major cities, including London and

dia and translation facilities.

The Government's support for such reforms is intended to underscore Mr Blair's wider agenda for improving the EU's decision-making, which he believes will be at the heart of the next inter-governmental conference in 2004. The Prime Minister wants the next negotiation, on defining the proper responsibilities of Brussels and national governments, to help to correct a perceived "democratic deficit" by giving more power to the European Council of elected leaders.

Mr Blair returned to Westminster saying that, in spite of all the difficulties, he had secured Britain's key national interests while agreeing a treaty that would enable the EU to open membership to the former Soviet-bloc states. In a statement to the Commons he said that the EU had to find a "more rational way" of making major decisions, adding: "Enlargement will now happen. British interests were advanced. But we cannot continue to take decisions as important as this in this way."

William Hague denounced the agreement as a "major step" towards a European sup-

erstate and said a Conservative government would refuse to ratify it. He challenged the Government to put the treaty to the public in a referendum.

The Prime Minister ridiculed the "fully rounded idiocy" of the Tory position. Mr Blair said that if Mr Hague had been Prime Minister he would either have scuppered the entire enlargement deal or returned to Britain declaring that he would hold a referendum on arcane details where the Treaty would abolish the national veto.

President Chirac of France conceded that the negotiations at Nice had been "very long and very difficult", although he predicted that it would come to be remembered as a great summit because of the breadth of its decisions. He could not conceal the disappointment felt in the European Commission and some European capitals, particularly of the smaller states, over what was seen as a weak treaty lacking in ambition.

Romano Prodi, the Commission President, bemoaned the refusal of individual countries to give up important vetoes. Although there was a large number of veto relaxations, many small and technical, the integrationists were angry that when it came to issues such as tax, social security, French television access and German opposition to free movement of professionals, the national interest again held sway.

X The number of vetoes relaxed differed according to those making the estimate. The Commission said 23 and the British Government put the figure as high as 39, although many were minor and repetitive.

Mr Blair said the UK had willingly agreed to move from unanimity to qualified majority voting in key policy areas where it was to Britain's advantage. "Our relative voting strength has been declining; it will now rise. It puts us in a far stronger position," he said.

He said the disappearance of some vetoes would be in Britain's interests. He highlighted trade in financial services, where majority voting would stop protectionism holding back British business; industrial policy; financial regulations affecting the EU budget; and the running of the European Court of Justice.

In one unexpected move Mr Blair gave up the veto over the choice of the European President, one that his predecessor exercised against the Belgian candidate Jean-Luc Dehaene several years ago.

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