



Before the storm: European Union leaders chat during a group photograph at the informal summit at Biarritz in south-west France. Picture: AFP

EU summit ends in struggle between big and small states

By Peter Norman and Michael Smith in Biarritz

"Nothing concentrates the mind more than having the barrel of a gun pointed at you." With a paraphrase of Lenin, Paavo Lipponen, the normally understated prime minister of Finland, described how the European Union leaders' weekend summit in Biarritz moved from a discussion of difficult technicalities to an open power struggle between small and big member states over their future influence in the EU.

The defining moment was Friday's dinner for EU leaders. After a day wading through the main points of the long-running Intergovernmental Conference for reforming the EU, in readiness for its enlargement to 27 or more countries, the 15 leaders turned to the politics behind the issues.

The result was a sharply polarised debate. The 10 small countries were taken aback when Jacques Chirac, the French president and summit host, subjected them to what one diplomat called a "frontal attack". Mr Chirac said they would bear the responsibility for the failure of enlargement unless they accepted the big countries' proposals for a small European Commission with fewer members than member states.

The premiers of Finland, Sweden and Luxembourg took the lead in rejecting Mr Chirac's charges. Luxembourg's Jean-Claude Juncker, said the two sides had sometimes clashed "with sabres drawn". Göran Persson of Sweden spoke of "tough and hard polit-

ical discussions". António Guterres of Portugal, who earlier spoke for a small Commission, declared the idea unacceptable and rejoined the small states' group.

In part, the heated discussion reflected accumulated frustration. There have been frequent complaints from other member states that France is conducting its six-month rotating EU presidency in a high-handed manner. But the row also showed

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how a gulf of understanding can arise in complex talks. Mr Juncker reported that the big states were surprised by the small states' stance.

When the German delegation first disclosed the plan to limit the size of the Commission and accept that big countries as well as small would have periods with no commissioner, it was portrayed as an olive branch to the small EU countries.

The big countries - Germany, France, the UK, Italy and Spain - at present have two commissioners each out of 20. Gerhard Schröder, the German chancellor, said "equal rotation" of commissioners was like moving from having two to just half a commissioner and a sign of his government's commitment to European integration.

But the small countries

argued rotation would substantially weaken the Commission - traditionally their ally - by sapping its political legitimacy. "How could the Commission push through a controversial state aid or competition ruling in Germany, without it having a German commissioner?" asked one diplomat.

For diplomats following the leaders' discussions, the passions aroused in Biarritz marked a decisive stage

in the IGC negotiations.

They will now run on two levels. Work will progress at a technical level to define how the EU can take more decisions through qualified majority voting instead of unanimity. Detailed work is also needed to flesh out the leaders' broad agreement to facilitate "enhanced co-operation" by which small numbers of member states will be allowed to pursue greater integration.

At another level will be the politically charged issues of the Commission's composition and the reweighting of member states' votes in the EU's decision-making Council of Ministers. Diplomats warn the row over the Commission is but a foretaste of more difficult vote reweighting talks.

After the fury of Friday night, it is possible to imagine a compromise in which the big

countries give up one of their commissioners and where capping the Commission's size is put off for another IGC after the first enlargement.

The reweighting of votes will be less easy to settle because it directly concerns the power of each member state to direct policies in the EU's council of ministers. This highly political issue will involve winners and losers.

Tony Blair, the UK prime minister, said the reweighting of votes was the focus of British interests in the current negotiation. "If we are being expected to reduce the number of commissioners we have to have a reweighting of votes," he said. "It is right, not because the big countries are demanding it but because it is fair."

The reweighting of votes will only be decided in the early hours of the last night of December's EU summit in Nice.

But the frank discussions at Biarritz have probably helped the movement towards a solution by enabling the EU's leaders to test each other's mettle.

For Mr Juncker, Friday's bruising discussions were essential to keep the negotiations on track. If they had been delayed until Nice, the IGC's conclusion would probably have been held up for six months until the final summit of Sweden's EU presidency next June.

In that case, Mr Juncker said, rather than a treaty of Nice, "we would have a treaty of Gothenburg".