

French at peace for duration of EU summit

By Robert Graham in Biarritz

For the next two days Jacques Chirac, the French president, and Lionel Jospin, the prime minister, will drop the guerrilla war they have been waging for political supremacy and present a united front at the European Union informal summit they are hosting.

But the message the French authorities are trying to get across of a France speaking with one voice on Europe is nevertheless weakened by the increasing problems of cohabitation.

President Chirac is hosting this summit in Biarritz, the first important such meeting under the French EU presidency, at a time when his authority has been damaged at home. He has been hurt by allegations of being linked to illicit funding activities of his Gaullist RPR party, and this week suffered the indignity of a parliamentary question concerning whether or not he enjoyed immunity from prosecution as head of state.

Mr Jospin has also seen his credibility dented by scandals touching close associates. Since the end of the summer his Socialist-led government has been overtaken by a growing sense of drift, and he will shortly be obliged to reshuffle his cabinet - to replace Labour minister, Martine Aubry, who is leaving to fight a mayoral election in Lille.

President Chirac, with his flair for the big occasion, is

Commissioner hopes for agreement on extension of majority voting

Michel Barnier, EU commissioner responsible for institutional reform, said he hoped the informal Biarritz summit would reach agreement on the extension of majority voting by member states on key issues, **Peter Norman reports from Biarritz.**

In an interview, Mr Barnier said progress on the question at Biarritz would provide a significant impetus for negotiations on other, more politically controversial reform issues ahead of December's IGC summit in Nice.

Mr Barnier, who represents the Commission in the long running inter-governmental conference (IGC) on EU reform, said the extension of qualified majority voting (QMV) was essential as the EU contemplated enlargement from its 15 member states towards 27 or 28 members and more.

However, he made clear

expected to seize the Biarritz summit to demonstrate he is managing France's European agenda and to halt the slide in his domestic popularity. Mr Jospin will play the loyal supporter.

Both men have a common interest in ensuring that this meeting paves the way for a successful summit at Nice in December, and they recog-

he was not advocating the end of unanimous decision making in sensitive areas of tax or social security co-ordination, where opposition from member states such as Britain and Denmark is guaranteed.

But he said there were several areas where a shift to QMV from unanimity would "make Europe operate efficiently" and be relevant to Europe's citizens. These included the widening the scope of the EU's common commercial policy to cover services and intellectual property rights, a move at present strongly opposed by France.

Other areas where decision making by QMV would be appropriate were justice and home affairs, regional policy, visa and asylum rules. QMV should be considered for tax measures that simplified or updated EU rules or prevented fraud or evasion.

nise it will require both perseverance and an element of luck to achieve the overhaul of the EU's institutions which the French presidency is pledged to achieve.

Behind this both men have very different approaches to the future of Europe. President Chirac has moved from being a Gaullist Euro-sceptic to embrace the Maastricht

The EU at Biarritz The agenda of an informal summit:

A) The Inter-governmental Conference (IGC) on EU reform
Aimed at reforming decision-making ahead of EU enlargement, IGC negotiations will be concluded in December at the Nice summit. At Biarritz, discussions will focus on the four main issues:

- **Majority voting by EU ministers**
One out of five EU decisions still requires unanimity between member states. France wants more qualified majority voting (QMV). But there is resistance to extending QMV over tax, social security issues, immigration and other areas.
- **The weighting of votes between big and small countries**
The IGC must work out a fair division of voting power in the council of ministers in an enlarged EU. The Commission has proposed a "double majority" system, with decisions requiring approval by a majority of countries, also commanding a majority share of the EU's population.
- **The size of the European Commission**
France has proposed keeping 20 EU commissioners, and rotating the appointments between member states. The 10 smaller member states are insisting on one commissioner per member.
- **Enhanced Co-operation**
Making it easier for smaller member states to move ahead with closer integration in certain areas. But how many can go off on their own, and how does the EU prevent the formation of exclusive "core groups?"

B) The Charter of Fundamental Rights
A draft charter has already been broadly approved by member states. A majority will argue that the document, seen by Euro-sceptics as the first step towards a European constitution, should not be legally binding.

Matters Arising:
Yugoslavia and the Balkans. The Middle East. Oil prices and supply. Lessons of the Austrian crisis.

Any other business:
What next for the EU? Should there be another IGC after Nice, addressing the future political structure of the union? If so, when? Before or after the admission of new EU members? Informal discussions expected.

and Amsterdam treaties. Over the past three years he has become an enthusiastic advocate of European integration and in Berlin this year outlined his idea of "a pioneer group" ready to enhance their co-operation within the EU's 15 members.

Mr Jospin and his colleagues have a more down-to-earth approach, pre-

ferring problem-solving to rhetoric and regard Mr Chirac's views as opportunistic and unrealistic. But Mr Jospin is frequently criticised for the poor lead he has given on European policy. This in turn has allowed Mr Chirac more space to state his own case.