

# Brussels puts a basic treaty back on agenda of EU reform

By Peter Norman in Brussels

The European Commission has suggested a new cycle of institutional reform to produce a new "basic treaty" for the European Union.

Michel Barnier, the commissioner responsible for the intergovernmental conference (IGC) on institutional reform, said the Commission was recommending that EU leaders at their summit in Nice next December should "lay down a procedure and a timetable for future work on recasting the treaties" with the aim of producing a "basic treaty for the EU".

The idea of making EU treaties easier to understand by splitting them into a core text covering the most important aspects of the union and putting less significant elements in separate texts is not new.

But the Commission suggestion, adopted last week, has triggered alarm in some member states, including the UK, which fears a new wave of treaty revision could delay the EU's present ambitious enlargement plans. There are also fears that proposals for ever greater EU integration would be tacked on to a seemingly innocuous move to make the abstruse and complex EU treaties easier to understand.

Mr Barnier emphasised that the Commission wanted the Nice summit to set a timetable and procedural arrangements that would not interfere with the current process of enlarging the EU to include up to 13 candidate countries.

The Commission's plan, if adopted, would ultimately result in another IGC, he

admitted. But unlike the present IGC, which aims to get the EU's decision-making powers and institutions ready for enlargement, acceptance of new EU members would not depend on completing the later IGC for simplifying the treaties.

"I see no problem with accessions to the EU taking place during reflection on these subjects," the commissioner said.

Mr Barnier said it was his personal wish that a group of experts should reflect on reorganising the treaties.

## The UK fears that a new wave of treaty revision could delay the EU's ambitious enlargement plans

Such reflection could start after ratification of the Nice summit results - a process that would take about two years. After about 18 months of reflection by the group, it could be time for the EU member states to start the next IGC, he said.

■ Laurent Fabius, the French finance minister, today launches his attempt to boost the euro-zone's international influence by giving more time to the monthly meeting of single currency ministers and holding a press conference the next day, AFX adds from Brussels.

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