

Chirac sets out social agenda

By Martin Fletcher
European Correspondent

PRESIDENT CHIRAC challenged Britain's drive for a US-style economy for Europe yesterday by promising that France would pursue an ambitious new European social agenda.

In his first speech to the European Parliament since France assumed the EU presidency last week, he vowed to strengthen workers' rights and social cohesion.

His words were seen by British MEPs as a direct riposte to the British-inspired free-market of last spring's "dot-com" summit in Lisbon which stressed economic liberalisation and innovation. Business representatives said it confirmed their view that the French presidency would lead to more regulation, not less.

"I am very attached to the European social model based on social dialogue, social protections adapted to the needs of the time, and recognition of the role of the state as protector of social cohesion," M Chirac declared. He identified workers' participation in company decision-making and a better balance between family life and work as key elements of a new social agenda.

He insisted that the EU's proposed new Charter of Fundamental Rights should contain social and economic

rights, not just the existing civil and political freedoms that Britain favours and he stressed the need for social cohesion and full employment as well as economic growth.

It was a speech that highlighted the deep divergence in economic philosophies of France, whose socialist Government has championed a 35-hour working week, and of Britain, which spent most of the 1980s rolling back trade union power and only belatedly and reluctantly accepted the EU social chapter.

"Europe has been going Britain's way in recent months, but this Europe of social intervention is yesterday's Europe," Simon Murphy, leader of Labour's MEPs, said. "Tomorrow's Europe is the Europe of the Lisbon summit."

Edward McMillan-Scott, the Conservative leader in the European Parliament, said the speech was "the antithesis to what Blair assumes is happening in Europe. Some people, and not just right-wingers, were quite shocked by the speech because it seemed to take Europe backwards to a statist and bloc approach".

A spokesman for Unice, an umbrella group of 35 European employers' organisations including Britain's Confederation of British Industry, condemned the speech. "It won't help innovation in Europe to have more rules and regulations when what we need is a more flexible market and more deregulation," he said.

Tories refused to participate in the debate on the French presidency because of France's



President Chirac said a better balance between family life and work was a key element of the new social agenda

continuing refusal to lift its ban on British beef. Mr McMillan-Scott said that in the circumstances M Chirac's support for a new European food agency was breathtaking. M

Chirac said France's priority was to agree the institutional reforms required for EU enlargement, otherwise the Union would be "condemned to very early paralysis".

□ THE European Court of Justice yesterday fined Greece 20,000 euros (£12,600) a day for its failure to clean up a waste dump in Crete. It was the first time that the Luxem-

bourg court has used its powers to fine an EU member country and sent a clear warning to France of the consequences of its refusal to import British beef.

LINKS

europa.eu.int/ official EU site
www.europarl.eu.int/charter/en/
European Parliament's Charter of Fundamental Rights



Heather Saunders, widow of the murdered British military attaché in Athens, talking yesterday to Costas Simitis, the Greek Prime Minister

Britain bolsters embassy security

By **Richard Beeston**
Diplomatic Editor
and **John Carr**
in Athens

BRITAIN is reinforcing security at its Athens Embassy and sending bullet-proof cars and extra guards to protect senior diplomats from the threat of further terrorist attack.

Stung by criticism in Parliament that it had failed to protect Brigadier Stephen Saunders, the military attaché murdered last month, the Foreign Office rejected charges of complacency yesterday.

"The safety of our staff at home and overseas is our highest priority," a spokesman said in response to criticism in

a report by the Commons Foreign Affairs Select Committee. Although the Foreign Office said it took the report's recommendations extremely seriously, it added that it would be "impossible to offer 24-hour total security" for all its staff abroad. A total of £11.8 million had been set aside to upgrade embassy security in Athens.

A security review at the embassy in March failed to anticipate the attack by the 17 November group, whose gunmen shot Brigadier Saunders as he drove to work in an unprotected car.

In the past the group has attacked mainly American and Greek targets, but the British are now vulnerable. Strict se-



Brigadier Saunders

curity measures, similar to those in places such as Sierra Leone and Colombia, are being introduced at the British

mission. The MPs' criticism coincided with fresh efforts in Athens by Heather Saunders, the widow of Brigadier Saunders, to put further pressure on the Greek authorities to find her husband's killers.

Yesterday she met Costas Simitis, the Prime Minister, to demand details of what has been done to catch the gunmen. The visit, made at her request, came less than a week after Mrs Saunders called on President Stephanopoulos to press home her case.

The issue has deeply embarrassed the Greek Government and prompted fears about the security risk for the 2004 Olympics in Athens. Several American multinational spon-

sors are said to be reconsidering their backing in light of the terrorist threat.

In the 25 years in which 17 November has been active, and has been held responsible for 23 killings, this is the first time that a victim's spouse has exerted so much highly publicised pressure on the Greek Government.

Mr Simitis's response was that the Greek police, in collaboration with British anti-terrorism experts, were still hard at work. Mrs Saunders's brother, Wing Commander Stephen Kell, said his sister's visit had the wider purpose of getting Greek public opinion to accept that domestic terrorism left no room for complacency.