

Public dispute between Chirac and Jospin over the way ahead for Europe gets presidency off to bumpy start

Fractious French take the EU helm

By Patrick Blahop
in Paris

FRANCE'S presidency of the European Union has got off to a fractious start after differences between President Jacques Chirac and the Prime Minister, Lionel Jospin, were aired in public.

In what amounted to a rebuke to the President, M Jospin said he was not ready to broadcast his own views on the long-term future of Europe.

M Chirac caused a stir last week when, during a state visit to Germany, he called for a "pioneer group" to press forward with EU integration and the drafting of a European constitution.

The initiative was received coolly by officials from M Jospin's Socialist Party, who have accused the conservative M Chirac of stealing their ideas.

M Jospin poured cold water on the President's speech at the weekend when he told a gathering of young socialists: "I don't want to jump too soon into the discussion on what Europe will be like in several years time."

"When the moment comes, I'll take part in the debate. For the time being, what concerns me is to stay focused on the European presidency."

Earlier, Pierre Moscovici, the Minister of Foreign Affairs, had distanced the government from M Chirac's views. "It's his speech," he said. "He conceived it, wrote it and delivered it. It's clearly not a speech by the French authorities."

The spat is a reminder that both the Prime Minister and President will be trying to use the limelight — shining on France as a result of its six months at European centre-stage — to show themselves at their best prior to the 2002 presidential elections.

They are almost certain to be the main candidates of Left and Right. Both are searching for a distinctive



Truce talks: M Chirac, centre, and M Jospin, right, put their differences aside in Paris yesterday before a meeting with Romano Prodi, left, on EU reform

EU policy that will make them appear modern-minded and pro-European — in keeping with the voters' mood.

Yesterday, they put their differences aside to welcome Romano Prodi, the European Commission president, and 19 commissioners to Paris for talks about EU institutional reforms which will be the main business of the

coming months. At a press conference, the two men played down the discord, with M Chirac presenting his remarks in Germany as the sort of thing that was expected during a state visit, and M Jospin saying there was "not the least difference" on how the EU presidency should be tackled.

France aims to complete

reforms — which include extending qualified majority voting to 39 new policy areas, revising the proportion of votes held by members of the council of ministers, and limiting the number of commissioners — before the Nice summit in December.

France is also pushing to strengthen the power of the Euro-11 group, the commit-

tee of euro-zone finance ministers.

In an interview in *Le Monde*, Laurent Fabius, the French Finance Minister, said: "Giving more visibility to the Euro-11 will be a strong theme of the French presidency."

Britain, which along with Greece, Denmark and Sweden, remains outside the

single currency, fears being marginalised if the group grows in influence.

It can take some comfort, however, from the importance France is attaching to pushing forward with the 1998 Anglo-French defence initiative to increase European military co-operation.

Meanwhile, students of the strained relationship

between M Jospin and M Chirac will be paying close attention to the President's speech in Strasbourg today.

They will be watching to see whether he elaborates on his thoughts about Europe's future — thereby further antagonising M Jospin — or behaves himself and sticks to the nuts-and-bolts of the French presidency.

Picture: REUTERS