

# Two French visions for EU

While Chirac unveils his grand vision, Jospin has more down-to-earth plans, writes Peter Norman

France has entered its six month presidency of the European Union looking in two directions.

Jacques Chirac, France's right-of-centre president, sees the presidency, which began on Saturday, as a stepping stone towards his vision of a future union of nation states with a constitution, one in which a "pioneer group" would forge ahead with joint projects. The leftwing government of Lionel Jospin has more down-to-earth objectives.

Although France wants to advance closer economic policy co-ordination, the EU's defence capability and social policy. Its priority, says Hubert Védrine, foreign minister, is to make a success of December's Nice EU summit - scheduled to agree the institutional reforms considered essential to enable the EU to enlarge from 15 to 25-30 member states. The challenge, says Pierre Moscovici, France's minister for Europe, is "difficult".

Just how difficult was highlighted last week when Mr Jospin told members of the Party of European Socialists it would be better not to reach a "minimal" agreement in Nice that involved no more than retouching existing treaties.

The comments of Messrs Jospin, Védrine and Moscovici reflect concern at the very slow progress made in the Intergovernmental Conference on EU reform since its start in February. The addition at last month's Feira EU summit of "re-inforced co-operation" to the IGC agenda was as much an admission of failure to advance as the promise of a breakthrough in the negotiations among the union's 15 member governments.



The two faces of France: Lionel Jospin (left) and Jacques Chirac have not seen eye-to-eye on foreign policy issues

AP

Reinforced co-operation, which would make it easier for small groups of member states to push ahead with greater integration, is controversial. It has raised fears in the UK and Scandinavia that the EU could finally give formal approval to the idea of a two-speed Europe. Spain is worried it could endanger the *acquis communautaire*, the body of law and practices to which all member states subscribe.

Reinforced co-operation would create the conditions for Mr Chirac's pioneer group to operate. The French president believes reinforced co-operation is essential to avoid gridlock after enlargement. Mr Jospin's government, however, is less convinced.

Mr Védrine last week made clear the final role of reinforced co-operation in running the EU would

depend on the development of negotiations on the other three main IGC topics.

The foreign minister said a "good agreement" on the three so-called "leftovers" from the Amsterdam Treaty, which took effect last year, could be sufficient for a treaty change in Nice without any new accord on reinforced co-operation. But equally, the absence of agreement on reinforced co-operation could prompt countries wishing to forge ahead with closer integration to do so anyway.

Mr Védrine's remarks probably reflected frustration at lack of progress in negotiations on the leftover issues of more qualified majority voting, curbing the number of commissioners and re-weighting countries' votes in the EU council of ministers.

But the minister's com-

ments also gave some insight into France's IGC tactics. They were a signal to Spain that France would not allow the EU to be held to ransom over the weighting of votes and a warning to Britain that blocking reinforced co-operation would be futile.

France can take this robust approach because it is convinced broad agreement exists with Germany on the main issues of its presidency following last month's Franco-German summit in Mainz and last week's state visit of Mr Chirac to Berlin. But equally, France appears anxious not to cause too many problems for Tony Blair, the UK prime minister. Paris is anxious to reassure Britain it should have nothing to fear from its plans to strengthen the informal euro-11 group in which finance ministers co-

ordinate policy in the single currency area.

Indeed, France argues that anything that contributes to the euro's success should help the British government eventually to persuade a sceptical UK public to abandon sterling. The modest improvements to the euro group's procedure planned by Laurent Fabius, the French finance minister, have been carefully pitched to improve co-ordination without encroaching on the responsibilities of the Ecofin council of the 15 EU finance ministers.

France has dropped suggestions, propagated by Dominique Strauss-Kahn, former finance minister, that the euro-11 should be seen as a precursor of a European economic government and it plans no additional bureaucracy to support the euro group's work.

## Chirac to back poll on president's term

By Robert Graham in Paris

President Jacques Chirac is expected to back a referendum for approving a reduction in the French president's term of office to five years from seven.

The referendum would follow a constitutional change that passed its final parliamentary hurdle after a vote last week in the Senate. The poll on the five-year term - *le quinquennat* - is likely to be held in early October. This will be in the middle of the French rotating presidency of the European

Union and risks being a big political distraction.

When last month President Chirac dropped his reservations about cutting the presidential term, he carefully avoided any commitment on how this significant constitutional amendment should be introduced. The main problem of holding a referendum is the risk of voter apathy or outright rejection by the electorate.

This could rebound on Mr Chirac - and so weaken his popularity at a time when he is preparing to run for a second term in 2002. Mr Chi-

rac's unconvincing television performance last month when he announced his change of heart on *le quinquennat* led to a drop in his popularity ratings. He was hard pressed to explain how he now backed something that he had always dismissed as "a mistake".

Analysts have warned that his lukewarm support for the change, plus the evident divisions in parliament, could confuse voters.

However, the other option for introducing this change to the Fifth Republic's 1958 constitution was even more

unpalatable. This would involve a joint session of the two houses of parliament with a two-thirds majority in favour required.

Out of loyalty to Mr Chirac a number of doubting rightwing senators backed the legislation last week. But almost a third of the Senate either voted against, abstained or avoided voting at all. A joint session might not muster the two-thirds majority and could open a wider and more divisive debate.

The change is designed to make the presidency more

accountable and avoid the inconveniences of co-habitation with a president of one political colour and a prime minister controlling parliament of another.

But the shorter presidency would come into effect as of 2002, with the presidential elections coming directly after legislative elections. Held in this order, the electorate is unlikely to chose a president from among the parties losing the parliamentary election and the new system would reinforce the role of the president at the expense of parliament.