

## BLAIR IN BERLIN

The 'two-speed' theory

# Britain warns against EU inner circle

From Roger Boyes in Berlin and Phillip Webster Political Editor

TONY BLAIR told Gerhard Schröder last night that he was opposed to the development of a European Union inner core.

Although Downing Street was striving to play down suggestions of conflict, pointing out that the two leaders' dinner in Berlin had been arranged months ago, Mr Blair told the German Chancellor that he was against a two-speed Europe and the federalist vision mapped out recently by Joschka Fischer, the German Foreign Minister.

Downing Street insisted yesterday that Mr Blair was fairly relaxed about Tuesday's speech in Berlin by President Chirac, although officials were swift to point out that his remarks had been undermined by the French Foreign Minister, Hubert Vedrine.

However, there is more alarm about recent utterances from the German Government. Mr Blair told Herr Schröder that his idea of a new inter-governmental conference (IGC) swiftly to follow the one being concluded under the French presidency should be put on hold. The Prime Minister told him that the priority should be enlarging the EU and that there should be no further IGC until after the next six applicants were allowed in, possibly not until 2005. Mr Blair said all member states should be treated as equals, including those coming in.

Herr Schröder's aim yesterday

was primarily to soothe Britain. His calculation is that the British will be more open towards Europe after the next general election. Despite Britain's deep reservations about the vision of a federal Europe set out by Herr Fischer, much of the tension at present seems to be between Britain and France rather than Britain and Germany.

Mr Blair also spoke out against French moves to strengthen the Euro X group of finance ministers, from which Britain is excluded because of its non-membership of the euro.

Mr Blair and Gordon Brown, his Chancellor, believe that French plans to strengthen the group will downgrade the power of Ecofin, the 15-member economic and financial council.

France wants to end the agreement that the Ecofin president should also chair Euro X, even if not a member of the euro.

The timing of the dinner was, however, less than perfect. Coming so soon after M Chirac's visit, it gave the impression to German commentators that the British were dropping in for a late briefing after the serious business had already been contracted by France and Germany.

German newspapers were quick to paint Mr Blair in a beleaguered position. "London is afraid," the headline in Ger-

many's leading conservative newspaper, the *Frankfurter Allgemeine*, said.

"The British reaction shows best of all that Chirac's speech was a quantum leap in the French position on Europe. Blair, who hitherto has skilfully appeared as a driving force when it suited him (Common Market, security policy) and stalled in other areas (flexibility, the euro), must fear being pushed again to where London stood under Thatcher and Major — on the periphery of Europe."

The newspaper said that the situation was not desirable, but added: "Blair should show more courage instead of staring at opinion polls." That was very much the tone of German analysis, in and out of the German Government.

Newspapers and indeed officials talking privately mock the lack of clarity in Britain's European policy.

"The British Government sees nothing new in Chirac's speech," the paper said. "If there were anything new they would, however, be against it." Another newspaper concluded: "Schröder is receiving a depressed Prime Minister who is losing popularity."

In his speech at Tübingen University today, Mr Blair is likely to express his backing for the concept of a Europe of nation states, rejecting the federalist dreams of ministers such as Herr Fischer.

British officials were pointing yesterday to the passages within M Chirac's speech that also backed the nation state as the building block for EU development.



Tony Blair and Gerhard Schröder on the Glienicke Bridge, a gap in the former Iron Curtain which saw spies swapped in the small hours

## The rendezvous

# Symbolic spot for exchange of views

By Roger Boyes

SHIELDED from the gaze of indifferent Berliners, Tony Blair was last night the Prime Minister who came in from the cold. He was quietly whisked to the very fringes of the city for an almost clandestine rendezvous with Gerhard Schröder, the German Chancellor, at the spot where Cold War spies used to be exchanged. The menu was, of course, secret.

Mr Blair is determined to get back into the thick of European politics. He was absent from the third Way conference at which Herr Schröder and Lionel Jospin, the French Prime Minister, bonded, and is nervous that the kind of two-

speed Europe proposed by President Chirac in Berlin this week will leave him trailing in the Franco-German wake.

If the Berlin dinner with Herr Schröder was supposed to shine the spotlight on Mr Blair, he must have been sorely disappointed. The Germans chose a site fabled for its obscurity. The contrast with the treatment of other recent visitors to Berlin could not have been more stark. Mischievous observers were speculating whether the beacons of the Third Way had become something of an embarrassment for its hosts now that the Franco-German marriage is on again.

The British Embassy denied this. "It was simply a convenient place," said a spokesman

in an extraordinary description of Berlin's most inconvenient dining venue.

President Clinton was taken the other day by the Chancellor to a lively pub in a trendy section of east Berlin. President Chirac was dined at the Ritz Carlton, designed by that most Francophile of Germans, Karl Lagerfeld. Careful thought goes into selecting such meeting places.

The choice of a converted museum close to Glienicke Bridge, the former East-West border, was therefore the source of serious analysis. Nothing symbolises the east quite as surely as this bridge. It was where the US spy Gary Powers, who had been caught making a flight over

the Soviet Union, was swapped for the Soviet spy, Rudolph Abel. The British businessman Greville Wynne was traded there for the KGB's Gordon Lonsdale.

In February 1986, on a frozen foggy dawn, the Russian Jewish dissident Anatoli Sharansky was steered across the bridge by the US ambassador in return for a clutch of Warsaw Pact agents. The exchanges all followed the same model and became raw material for Hollywood dramas.

Two black stretch limousines would park at both ends of the bridge. The eastern end marked the beginning of the approach road to Potsdam, where the KGB and the Soviet military had a big garrison.

The border ran down the middle. The dawn swaps were monitored by armed agents on the banks of the river. Something similar happened yesterday, albeit after dusk: the limos, the trench-coated men with miniature radios.

What — or who — was up for exchange yesterday? Mr Blair, huddled against the unseasonable cold, made clear (after a fashion) Britain's policy on a two-speed Europe: the Government did not want to be part of it, but was determined to be a leading force in Europe. What did this mean? The Germans were not sure.

As in all good spy thrillers the shadowy heroes of Glienicke Bridge were masters of ambiguity.

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