

Chirac and Blair face tough choices on integration

From Martin Fletcher
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FRANCE wants nothing short of a triumph at the December summit in Nice, but diplomats know it must temper its new fervour for integration and accommodate British fears if it is to steer a course through some of the most tortuous challenges to face the European Union.

France takes over the rotating presidency on Saturday, facing a catalogue of unsolved rows over the rules for running the EU as the number of member states rises from 15 to 28. The risk that the presidency will end in failure and recrimination is huge.

France's top priority is to resolve the rows dogging the intergovernmental conference (IGC) — the year-long consultation between the 15 member states to prepare for enlargement. Final agreement on those crucial issues will be thrashed out at Nice. Pierre Moscovici, the French Europe Minister, said yesterday: "It is on the success of the IGC that France will be judged."

There are only four main items on the summit agenda — the so-called "Amsterdam leftovers" from the 1997 summit — but they are intertwined and formidable:

□ Reinforced co-operation. The "fast-track" or "two-speed Europe" model which would allow an "avant-garde" to become integrated and leave laggards like Britain behind.

The French are determined to pursue this idea to allow an inner core of the 15 member states to forge ahead. Britain, the Scandinavians and others are determined to prevent a two-tier Europe. "There can be no second-class citizens in Europe," Tony Blair and José-Maria Aznar, Spain's Prime Minister, declared recently.

□ Qualified Majority Voting (QMV). Almost all member states accept the need to curb the national veto to prevent gridlock in an EU of as many as 28 states, but they do not agree on how far to extend the use of QMV. France and other member states believe QMV should be the rule, but Britain

insists the national veto should be retained in tax, defence, social security, treaty changes and border controls.

□ Commission make-up. The IGC must decide how to limit the number of commissioners in an enlarged EU.

□ Re-weighting national voting strengths. The larger countries want proportionately more votes to safeguard their interests.

There are three other main issues which could complicate the Nice agenda:

□ Charter of Fundamental Rights. The French presidency must draw up the proposed new charter and resolve the contentious question of whether it should be legally binding. Britain insists the charter should be a slim, declaratory document that merely lists existing rights, but the French want to include a raft of economic and social rights.

□ European Social Agenda. A new French plan to counter the British-inspired, free market philosophy of March's Lisbon summit with a "European social agenda" covering issues such as workers' rights, working conditions and gender equality.

□ Euro-II. France also wants to strengthen the role of the Euro-II, the informal grouping of euro-zone finance ministers, to bolster the beleaguered euro. Britain will fight any move to have Euro-II supplant Ecofin, the forum where all 15 finance ministers meet, as the EU's "economic government".

On many of these issues, Britain is not alone in its opposition to more integration. It has studiously built alliances with the Scandinavian states and Spain. Nor are London and Paris at odds on every issue; both want to use the year to flesh out their joint plan to set up a 60,000-strong EU rapid reaction force for peacekeeping and humanitarian aid.

But each faces six months of tough politics. Mr Blair will have to choose between his desire to show he is a good European and being accused by the Conservatives of selling out British interests in the run-up to next year's general election.



Like minds: José-Maria Aznar of Spain and Tony Blair