



President Chirac and the German chancellor, Gerhard Schröder, likely founders of pioneer group Photograph: Fabian Bimmer

Chirac pushes EU changes

President woos Germany with 'pioneer group' proposal

John Hooper in Berlin and
Michael White in London

President Jacques Chirac of France moved yesterday to reassure French and German voters that their two countries still dominate the EU's agenda when he used a speech in Berlin to call for closer integration for those member states which want it.

Mr Chirac's use of the phrase "pioneer group" to describe his plan for setting up an inner core of states next year raised renewed Eurosceptic alarm in London at the prospect of a two-speed Europe — with Britain left in the slow lane.

But neither Downing Street nor the Foreign Office took fright at the speech, which they saw as more concerned to persuade voters at home that the Franco-German axis is still a force to be reckoned with despite recent difficulties. "This is not about us," said one senior official.

Two days before Mr Blair dines with Chancellor Ger-

hard Schröder in Berlin, the French president used a speech to the newly restored Reichstag to echo themes which both leaders and their foreign ministers have explored in recent weeks — how to make the EU cope with the long-term consequences of enlargement from 15 to 20 or more members.

In a speech to the lower house of the German parliament, Mr Chirac declared: "The countries which want to go further towards integration ... ought to be able to do so without being held back by those who — and it is their right — do not wish to go ahead so quickly".

The president stressed that he remained opposed to any form of political union that swamped the nation states, let alone a United States of Europe.

And he made clear that his proposed "inner core" of EU states would not — initially at least — deal with the big issues of constitutional and institutional reform. The EU is already grappling with an inter-

governmental conference (IGC), due to end at Nice in December, on ways of streamlining decision-making when the numbers increase.

Enlargement to the south and east is fraught with difficulties, not least for France and Germany which fear cheap labour and cheap farm produce as well as the hunch that Britain — and newer EU members — want to use the newcomers to "dilute" the EU into a looser arrangement.

Mr Chirac's speech was being seen in London last night as a counter to that fear, suggesting that the original "common market" six states could pursue closer union, though Italy is conspicuously absent from involvement in such talk.

Mr Blair's spokesman said later: "We are completely comfortable with the debate about the future of Europe. This is something the prime minister is playing a part in, and when we are talking about groups of states being able to go ahead together in co-operating in particular

areas — that already happens."

But there were several aspects of the Chirac plan which may set alarm bells ringing in London and elsewhere because they smack of a "two-speed" mentality in which the same states do all the core co-operation.

Mr Chirac's pioneer group would aim to co-ordinate the economic policies of its members. It would have its own secretariat, "responsible for ensuring the consistency of the positions and policies of the members of the group" and, the member states of the inner core would be free to reach agreements outside the 1957 Treaty of Rome.

President Chirac said Germany and France should be among the founders of the pioneer group and that countries which wanted to join should be free to do so.

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