

# Blair slips away as his European love affair fades

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TONY Blair – who recently promised to build a “pro-European consensus” in Britain – slipped away early from the European Union summit in Greece, a move widely seen as a sign of growing disillusionment with EU procedure.

The Prime Minister annoyed the Greek presidency by leaving the meeting a day ahead of schedule after the unveiling by Giscard d’Estaing, the former French president, of the EU’s draft constitution.

Mr Blair, who welcomed the draft as a “good basis” for future work, wanted to spend Saturday with his family rather than thrashing out the EU’s Balkans policy.

To prevent a diplomatic rift, the Prime Minister was said to have persuaded his good friend Jose Maria Aznar, the Spanish prime minister, to take an early cut as well.

Bertie Ahern, the Irish prime minister, also left last night. But Downing Street’s claims that “most others” were pulling out, leaving the talks on the Balkan states to foreign ministers, were undermined when it was confirmed that President Jacques Chirac and Chancellor Gerhard Schröder were staying until the end of the meeting today.

A Greek official said it was naturally “disappointing” that Mr Blair and a few others were leaving. “We would like everyone to stay and be here to give a signal to the Balkan nations that they have a future in the European Union. If they don’t, it is disappointing.”

In a gap in the morning session, Mr Blair briefed a small group of journalists, saying he broadly welcomed the draft constitution. But he made clear Britain still had work to do in the forthcoming inter-governmental conference to ensure it was acceptable.

“There is no way Britain is going to give up our independent, sovereign right to determine our tax policy, our for-

eign policy, our defence policy, our own borders,” he said. “So there’s no way that we would agree to put any of that at risk.”

EU officials were surprised that there was no press conference by Mr Blair. They saw it as evidence that the Prime Minister’s love affair with Europe had cooled.

“It is not a dramatic thing nor a complete falling out by any means, just a gradual loss of interest on both sides,” said one official.

The view among EU diplomats is that, like Margaret Thatcher and John Major before him, Mr Blair’s early enthusiasm about Europe – and Europe’s hopes for him – have given way to weary resignation.

“No one here believes that he is going to deliver a different British policy on Europe any more and he doesn’t seem to believe it either,” said one EU source.

Mr Blair’s irritation with the summit was understandable.

On Thursday night, he got a bloody nose after tabling proposals to hold asylum seekers heading for Europe in camps near their homelands.

He wanted to show that EU co-operation over asylum could work. But it did not. The Germans, French, Greeks and Swedes disrespectfully killed off the idea.

Yesterday was another no-win day for Mr Blair. He could not enthuse too much about the new EU constitution because public opinion back home would not wear it. Nor could he be too critical because much of what is in it – including the plan for a new post of EU council president – was the result of his ideas.

“It is important to welcome it but also to recognise that we have our red lines,” he said, covering all his bases.

EU officials noted that while Mr Blair had pushed forward the integrationist agenda on defence, asylum and immigration, his defence of the British veto was no different from Mrs Thatcher and Mr Major in years gone by.