

Greece swings behind plan for full-time EU president

By George Parker in Brussels

Greece, holder of the rotating European Union presidency, yesterday became the latest country to endorse scrapping the current "musical chairs" system in favour of a full-time EU president.

Costas Simitis, Greek prime minister, is understood to have changed his mind after spending the last five months trying to combine running his government with chairing the EU.

Anders Fogh Rasmussen, the Danish prime minister, performed a similar *volte face* after his six-month stint in the EU presidency last year. It now seems increasingly likely that the European Convention, drawing up a new EU constitutional treaty, will endorse a full-time EU president.

The idea has been championed by Tony Blair, British prime minister, and Jacques Chirac, French president, as a way of strengthening the European Council - the forum for heads of govern-

ment. Yesterday, in a debate on the division of power, members of the 105-strong convention remained deeply divided. Many smaller countries insist the EU president would be answerable mainly to the large countries, and that the arrangement could undermine the European Commission, which champions the general interest.

Under the present system the EU chair changes hands every six months, causing disruption to European business and confusion to world leaders.

George Papandreou, Greek foreign minister, told the Financial Times that he recognised concerns that smaller countries felt their views might be ignored.

But he added: "I also understand there are arguments of continuity, consistency, credibility and visibility in international affairs." He proposed that the new EU president be directly elected by Europe's citizens, claiming that such an election would "mobilise and energise citizens".

However, many smaller countries argue that such a plan would give the EU president an even more powerful mandate, and further undermine the role of the Commission. Elmar Brok, German Christian Democrat MEP, was among a majority of convention members who said the new job could "disturb the balance between the institutions".

But Valéry Giscard d'Estaing, president of the convention, is determined to push the idea forward, citing the backing of the biggest member states. Peter Hain, British government representative on the convention, said: "It is not about big countries versus small. We need to have a mechanism that offers continuity."

Meanwhile, it seems likely that Mr Giscard d'Estaing will be given until mid-July to complete the fine print of the draft treaty, although he will present the bulk of the work at the EU summit in Thessaloniki on June 20.