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Guardian

Tony Blair's bid for EU presidency sinks

Ex-PM's chances of winning role slide as Sarkozy and Merkel fail to back him

- [Nicholas Watt](#) and [Ian Traynor](#) in Brussels
- [guardian.co.uk](#), Thursday 29 October 2009 21.26 GMT

Tony Blair's hopes of becoming Europe's first sitting president were receding fast tonight as Britain admitted his chances of success were "fading" after the continent's centre-right leaders made it clear one of their own must have the post. Hours after [Gordon Brown](#) delivered his strongest statement of support for Blair – disclosing that he had spoken to him earlier this week – British sources indicated that the former prime minister was unlikely to assume the high-profile job. "It would be right to describe Tony's chances as fading," one British source said. "[Nicolas Sarkozy](#) and [Angela Merkel](#) are not terribly enthusiastic. Silvio Berlusconi remains his strongest backer."

Blair's expected failure to secure the post of president of the European Council meant that [David Miliband](#) was emerging as a serious contender to assume the new post of high representative for foreign policy. The foreign secretary insisted, however, that he was "not available".

Miliband spoke out as British sources said it had become clear in recent days that Blair would struggle to become president. The post is likely to be filled in the next month amid signs that the Czech Republic will become the last EU country to ratify the Lisbon treaty.

Sarkozy, the French president, and Merkel, the German chancellor, are understood to have agreed at a dinner at the Elysée Palace last night that the new president should be appointed from the main centre-right EPP grouping, which brings together the parties currently ruling most EU countries.

Brown gave a hint at a press conference that Blair's candidacy was fading when he qualified his strong backing for his predecessor by stating that there were also other candidates for the job. "Of course it may not happen and there are other candidates as well," he said.

The prime minister's remarks came after he attended an acrimonious meeting of the European centre-left leaders this afternoon, shortly before the EU summit in Brussels began.

Brown was understood to have had a tense exchange with Martin Schulz, the German leader of the Socialists in the European parliament, who wants the left to assume the new foreign policy post, leaving the presidency to the centre right. Brown told the meeting: "You need to get real. This is a unique opportunity to get a progressive politician to be the president of the council."

But it soon became clear that Blair has no support on the left, let alone on the centre right. José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero, Spain's centre-left prime minister, for the first time publicly queried the Blair candidacy by announcing that the centre left across the EU was more concerned with securing the other post of European foreign minister. Zapatero, who will have to work with the new European figureheads when Spain assumes the EU's six-month rotating presidency on 1 January, said the European socialists were clear that they want the post of the high representative. "There is a preference for the high representative," he said. "That is rather reasonable."

A senior Spanish official said this was the first time that Zapatero had "dropped Blair" and that the centre-left in the EU was seeking a deal with the centre-right, led by Merkel. The centre-right would get the job coveted by Blair, while the centre left would take the foreign minister post. The lack of support for Blair became clear when Jean Asselborn, Luxembourg's foreign minister, launched a strong attack on him as he emerged from the meeting of Socialist leaders. "It is not about the person of Tony Blair. Now in the United States, Obama is the president, it is no more Mr Bush. We have a new treaty, we have to reset Europe and we need to start with some new ideas. There is and will remain a link for the next generation between Iraq, Bush and Tony Blair."

Downing Street will resist criticism that it was wrong to mount such a strong campaign in favour of Blair when it had become clear earlier this week that his chances were fading.

Brown believes it was right – and in the national interest – to argue strongly for Blair when there was a chance to secure such a senior post for Britain. Blair, who had a tense relationship with Brown during his decade as prime minister, will be pleased by the strength of his successor's support.

Brown said today: "Let me say very clear that we, the British government, believe that Tony Blair would be an excellent candidate and an excellent person to hold the job of president of the council.

"His international experience is well known, his expertise on environmental, economic and security issues is well known to everybody throughout Europe as well as known throughout the world ... If you have the chance for that to happen it is in Britain's national interest."

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