

TV invited to put EU in spotlight after Britain drops opposition

*By Stephen Castle and Andrew Grice in Brussels
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A British volte-face over openness in the EU has ended in humiliation as Tony Blair failed to water down moves to throw open law-making sessions to TV cameras and public scrutiny.

At a summit in Brussels yesterday EU leaders agreed to plans, originally put forward in the European constitution, to make public all debates and votes by ministers on mainstream European legislation. Britain put forward very similar proposals last year during its six-month presidency of the EU when it called for the beginning and end of the procedures to be held in public.

But when Austria, which now holds the presidency, proposed opening up all the process, the new Foreign Secretary, Margaret Beckett, came out against the plan. Arguing that this would push real decision-making into the corridors, she insisted that detailed discussions are, "not in the public domain and are never likely to be".

Yesterday Mr Blair failed to back his minister, agreeing to the provisions and winning only the smallest of concessions - a review of the scheme in six months time. The summit's decision was an embarrassing rebuff for Mrs Beckett at her first major European meeting since succeeding Jack Straw. But British officials insisted she was happy to see a pilot scheme go ahead.

Wolfgang Schüssel, the Chancellor of Austria and summit chairman, praised Britain for "withdrawing its concerns" about televising proceedings. "We are going to try to get a breath of fresh air into the European house and stimulate better public awareness," he said.

William Hague, shadow Foreign Secretary, said: "It is extraordinary that Margaret Beckett's first European initiative as Foreign Secretary was to try to persuade the EU to do more of its business in secret. Thank goodness it failed."

The change in procedure is the first agreement by the heads of government to accept a specific demand included within the European constitution. EU leaders also refused to kill off the treaty itself, rejected by referendums in France and the Netherlands a year ago, agreeing to work towards reviving a less grandiose version by 2008.

Mr Blair, who privately believes the constitution is in effect dead, refused to pronounce it so. He said Europe needed to focus on "bread and butter issues" that worried people before trying to win approval for a new treaty. The Prime Minister said: "We must ask the people of Europe what worries they have ... then, when we need people's consent to change the constitution, we have a better chance of getting it."

Jose Manuel Barroso, the European Commission President, said it was up to member states whether or not to hold referendums on whatever was agreed in 2008. But he added: "In our representative democracy it is completely democratic to vote in the parliament." ...