

BARNIER NEW FRENCH FOREIGN MINISTER

01-04-2004

EPP President Wilfried MARTENS today welcomed the appointment of Commissioner Michel BARNIER as the new French Foreign Minister, and his successor in the Commission, Jacques BARROT.

Barnier, 53, a key player in the European Convention to draft an EU Constitution, is one of several prominent Commissioners set to return to national politics after the June European elections..

"Michel Barnier will be much missed in Brussels," the EPP President said. "But his experience of European politics will be invaluable in Paris, above all in the negotiations to ensure the Constitution is finally agreed. I am also delighted that his place will be taken by Jacques Barrot, who has long ministerial and parliamentary experience, and above all a deep and lifelong commitment both to Christian Democracy and to Europe."

Barrot, 67, head of the UMP group in the French National Assembly, is a close ally of President Jacques CHIRAC. In 1999, along with Michel Barnier, Jean-Pierre RAFFARIN, now prime minister (pictured left), and Dominique PERBEN - they were collectively known as "the four musketeers" - he was instrumental in launching the campaign to ensure Chirac's election to the French presidency, bringing together the political forces of the centre and centre-right.

But the Union pour un Mouvement (UMP) Populaire lost heavily in the recent local and regional elections, retaining only one of the 21 mainland regions. The defeat is largely blamed on unpopular reforms to public sector pensions, and other attempts to cut the burden of France's extensive welfare system.

Other changes in the government reshuffle following last weekend's regional elections in France: Nicolas SARKOZY becomes finance minister, being replaced as Interior Minister by the former Foreign Minister Dominique de VILLEPIN.