Calm down, furious Clegg tells French

By Martyn Brown
Political Correspondent

The cross-Channel war of words escalated last night after a furious Nick Clegg said comments by French politicians were "simply unacceptable".

The Deputy Prime Minister slammed a broadside of Gallic outbursts over the "worrying" state of the UK economy during a telephone conversation with French leader Francois Fillon.

The French Prime Minister rang Mr Clegg to "clarify" that his and other remarks yesterday were not a slight on Britain.

**Negative**

But a Downing Street spokesman said Mr Clegg hit back by saying that "recent remarks from members of the French government about the UK economy were simply unacceptable and steps should be taken to calm the rhetoric."

The spokesman added: "PM Fillon agreed and they both undertook to speak again shortly to discuss economic co-operation."

No 10 indicated that David Cameron fully backed his coalition partner's move to rebuke the French PM over the recent comments.

The clash came just hours after France's Finance Minister Francois Baroin waded in by claiming the British economy was weaker than the French.

However, France was last night facing the prospect of having its AAA credit rating downgraded. The respected Fitch ratings agency said it was keeping the credit grade at AAA but revising its outlook to negative from stable.

Fitch said France's debt was expected to rise to 92 per cent of GDP in 2014.

Belgium had its credit rating cut by two notches last night by investors agency Moody's, to Aa3 from Aa1.

Mr Baroin had earlier said: "We would prefer to be French right now than British, in terms of the economy."

He added: "The economic situation of Britain is worrying today."

Earlier this week Mr Fillon said credit ratings agencies should focus on Britain's debts rather than France's economy.

His words followed suggestions from the chairman of the French central bank that the UK's economy should be downgraded, ahead of France, because the British economy was weaker.

Christian Noyer suggested it should start with the UK "which has more deficits, as much debt, more inflation, less growth than us".

But France has been warned by US credit ratings agency Standard & Poor's that it could be downgraded over the eurozone crisis.

Relations between Paris and London have become increasingly sour since David Cameron refused to sign up a week ago to a European summit deal on the debt crisis.

**Nervousness**

Andrew Tyrie, chairman of the Treasury Select Committee, said the remarks by French figures were "a reflection of the great nervousness around"

"We have been watching the slow-motion train crash about to happen for some time," he told BBC Radio 4's World at One.

"We all have an interest in seeing an orderly resolution. Trying to distract attention to other countries' problems will not help."
Scandal of how councils are squandering £37,000 a day on interpreters

By Anil Dawar

COUNCILS are spending more than £1.1million a month helping residents who do not speak English, new figures reveal.

Taxpayers in England have had to foot a bill of £27million for translation and interpreting over the last two years – a staggering £37,000 a day.

The total covers face-to-face interpreters, document translation and telephone assistance and comes as councils across the country are being forced to lay off tens of thousands of staff and cut back vital local services.

Some areas are seeing their bills soaring despite official guidance calling on local authorities to find ways of helping people learn English.

Figures provided by 354 local authorities in England show that over two years the bill for interpreting and translating was £25.5million.

Kent is the highest spending single authority in the country with a two-year bill of £1.9million.

However, the combined cost for the multi-cultural London boroughs is at least £10.5million.

The north London borough of Enfield spent £1.16million on £25,000 helping non-native residents.

This is more than the whole of the city of Manchester, which used up £27,607 in public cash, and the cities of Leicester, Liverpool, Southampton, Sunderland and Norwich combined.

Last night, Nick de Bois, Tory MP for Enfield North, said: “There is a real concern how council budgets are under pressure, people want to be reassured that their local council is getting its spending priorities right. Translating public documents cannot be a priority.”

Matthew Elliott, chief executive of the TaxPayers’ Alliance, said: “It is incredible that councils are spending so much on translation. Local authorities shouldn’t routinely need translation services, they should only be required in a few exceptional cases.”

Among the more notable figures revealed under Freedom of Information requests, the London boroughs of Haringey and Hackney spent £821,000 and £748,000 respectively.

Birmingham had a bill of £777,000 and in Lib Dem leader Nick Clegg’s constituency city of Sheffield – where 690 council staff face the axe – costs rose 150 per cent between 2009 and 2011.

In Cumbria, the highest spending single city, had a two-year total of £1.1million.

Guidance by the Department for Communities and Local Government says: “We would encourage local authorities to consider whether translation is necessary, whether it should be available on demand, and whether it can be done in a way that helps people learn English.”

By Anil Dawar

Sir Andrew Green of Migration Watch UK said: “Perhaps we are seeing the dawn of common sense in these immigration cases.”

And UKIP MEP Gerard Batten called the ruling a rare “victory for common sense”.

One of the claimants was British-born Rashida Chapti, 54, whose Indian husband of 37 years and father of her six children cannot join her in Leicester because he cannot speak English. She said she plans to appeal.

The other claimants are a couple from Pakistan and another from the Yemen.

The Joint Council for the Welfare of Immigrants said: “In countries experiencing conflict, poverty, natural disasters, and political instability, it can be difficult to acquire linguistic skills prior to arrival in the UK.”

The judicial review was conducted in Birmingham
THE LABOUR PARTY ONCE MORE FAILS THE TEST ON IMMIGRATION CONTROLS

According to most polls immigration is the second most important political issue to most voters—behind the state of the economy but ahead of such major concerns as the NHS and crime.

Labour has admitted it “made mistakes” in its handling of the issue. After that emissary from Middle Britain Gillian Duffy finished off Gordon Brown during the election campaign over the number of foreigners “flocking” here it could hardly say anything else.

So one would have thought that the immigration debate held in the Commons on Monday evening would have been the scene of significant speeches from Labour MPs keen to show a sceptical electorate that they had learned their lessons. Not a bit of it.

In fact no Labour backbencher made a speech in the three-hour debate and most of those who interjected in Tory ones criticised the Government on behalf of immigrants. For example, Barry Gardiner (Brent North) and Tristram Hunt (Stoke Central) worried about the impact of the visa clampdown on foreign students. An exception was Frank Field (Birkenhead), a longstanding critic of his party’s “open door” approach.

But mainly it was left to Tory MPs to tell it how it is. As Julian Brazier (Canterbury) put it: “Many of those who arrived in Britain under the last Government, particularly from the Asian subcontinent, were unskilled and joined many insular communities in which incomes were already low and in some cases the unemployment rate was near to 50 per cent. Pakistani and Bangladeshi communities, for example, were those most likely to enter the UK through the family route after the primary purpose rule was dropped.”

Jackie Doyle-Price (Con, Thurrock) said she had lost count of instances where people with no right to be here had sought to exploit the “right to a family life” in Labour’s Human Rights Act. They thought that having a baby was the key, she said. James Morris (Con, Walsall North and Rowley Regis) cited the case of a Pakistani national whose visa had expired four years earlier but who had £100,000 of NHS treatment he was not entitled to.

Labour’s new immigration spokesman Chris Bryant showed signs of contrition – he admitted transitional controls should have been imposed on Eastern European workers. But anyone watching would have been left in little doubt that Labour as a whole is still not interested in reducing immigration.
Euro tumbles as debt crisis dogs markets

By Peter Cunliffe

The euro struggled to hold ground yesterday after its biggest weekly drop in three months, dogged by worries about the future of the single currency.

In a welcome boost for Britons heading to the Continent over the holiday period, the single currency has dropped by 2.6 per cent this week in its worst performance since September.

It is now at the same level against the pound as in February and the same level against the US dollar as in January. In choppy trading, the euro edged up against sterling to 83.9p and to $1.30.

Stock markets were also in the doldrums, with the FTSE 100 down 13.5 to 5387.3, while Germany's Dax and France's CAC 40 were also off.

Bank shares largely shrugged off a credit downgrading of seven major banks by ratings agency Fitch on Thursday night but investors and traders remained nervous at the prospect of likely downgrades from Standard & Poor's.

After European markets closed, Fitch said it may downgrade seven countries.

Relief that Italy's government won a vote of confidence in its austerity measures was tempered by figures showing that Ireland's economy shrunk by the fastest rate in two years in the third quarter of the year.

Derek Halfpenny, head of global currency research at Bank of Tokyo-Mitsubishi, said: "The eurozone could be unravelling and as long as that option remains in the market the risk of pronounced moves and significant uncertainty remains extremely high."

Richard Driver, analyst at Caxton FX, said: "As this past week wore on, it dawned on the markets that the EU leaders are simply not in a position to commit to instant groundbreaking measures and that this debt crisis will not be solved any time soon."