

EUROPEAN COMMUNITY

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

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BACKGROUND NOTE

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WHAT IS THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT?

The European Parliament, or "Assembly" as it is officially called, has 198 members nominated by the nine member countries' national legislatures from among their membership. This procedure is similar to the one by which members of the US Senate were appointed before the passage of the Seventeenth Amendment. By 1978, EP members are to be elected by direct popular vote.

Powers of the Parliament

Members of the European Parliament, as elected members of their national legislatures, exert a Community influence on their countries' policies.

In the EC decision-making process, the Parliament exercises advisory and supervisory powers. It discusses policy and delivers opinions on EC Commission proposals. These opinions, given in the form of "resolutions," carry weight. Just recently, for example, the EC Commission condemned executions of Basque nationalists by the Spanish Government and broke off negotiations for closer links with Spain at the instigation of the Parliament. The Parliament was also heeded in amendments to the Community's draft statute for a company law.

In addition to powers of suasion, the European Parliament exercises a policing role over the EC Commission, the initiator of every Community policy. The Parliament can oust the Commission (as a body, not individual commissioners) by a vote of censure. One motion of censure has been brought, but it was not put to a vote because the Commission's term had only about a month to run.

The Parliament also has a limited but growing authority over the Community budget. It can veto parts of the budget and force the Council of Ministers to reconsider (details below).

Direct Elections Slated for May 1978

The 1957 Treaty creating the European Economic Community (EEC) provided for direct elections to the European Parliament. As required by the treaty, the Parliament, in the early Sixties, drafted proposals for such elections, but the Council of Ministers did not act on them. After the United Kingdom, Denmark, and Ireland joined the Community in January 1973, direct elections received new impetus, mainly to give the ordinary citizen a sense of belonging in the European Community and of sharing in its decision-making process.

Meeting at the "Summit" in December 1974 in Paris, the heads of State or Government said that direct elections should take place "as soon as possible," in any case, "in or after 1978." Accordingly, the Parliament has made new proposals for direct elections, in the form of a draft convention.

The New Proposals

The new draft convention on direct elections was adopted by an overwhelming majority at the European Parliament's January 1975 sitting. Of the 198 members, 106 voted for (33 Socialists, 13 Liberals, 17 Conservatives, six Progressive Democrats, and two Independents). Two Socialists (Danish) voted against, and there were 17 abstentions (nine Communists, six Progressive Democrats (all French), and two Liberals (both Danish)).

According to the draft convention, the Parliament would be enlarged to 355 members. Distribution of seats would be weighted to give the smaller countries a few more seats than the size of their populations and economic strength would seem to warrant.

Members of the Parliament would be elected by a "uniform procedure." This phrase has been interpreted to mean that each member state could initially choose its own voting system, voting age, and other criteria so as to safeguard national customs. The United Kingdom, for instance, will not have to go to the polls on Sunday.

It would be neither compulsory (as at present) nor forbidden for members of the European Parliament to belong to their national legislatures as well as the Parliament. Members would be elected for five-year terms.

The EC Council of Ministers must now accept the convention. Then, each member state must accept it and pass the necessary laws "in accordance with their respective constitutional requirements."

The Parliament's Budgetary Powers

Control over the European Community's budget is exercised jointly by the European Parliament and the Council of Ministers. The Commission is responsible for preparing a preliminary draft budget for each calendar year. The Council and the Parliament then consider the budget in two "readings."

All Community expenditure is classified as either "compulsory" or "non-compulsory." According to the EEC Treaty, compulsory expenditure is "expenditure...resulting from this treaty or from acts adopted in accordance therewith." Other expenditures are non-compulsory.

Parliament has the power to reject the budget as a whole. Within the budget, Parliament has the last word on non-compulsory expenditure, while the Council has the last word on compulsory items. Parliament cannot increase non-compulsory expenditures beyond a certain limit without the Council's consent. This limit is calculated each year by the Commission, but it may be altered by agreement between the Council and Parliament.

In addition to being responsible for the final adoption of the budget as a whole, the Parliament gives the Commission the authority to spend money.

The above procedure should go into effect in time for the Community's 1976 budget after member state ratification of a July 1975 amendment to the Community treaties.

In the 1975 budget, 85 per cent of the proposed expenditures fell into the "compulsory" category. Agricultural expenditures accounted for 75 per cent of the entire budget.