



**European
community**

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

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EUROPEAN COMMUNITY: WHAT FUTURE FOR THE PARLIAMENT?

(First of Two Articles)

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Washington

To many, the European Community -- the Common Market -- is just a multigovernmental trading club, based on a customs union. To others more familiar with its complexity, the Market is a first step toward a United States of Europe. But whatever it is, the European Parliament is perhaps the key: for the EC is a technocracy which has achieved its main objectives by overriding the tribalism of nation-states -- but a technocracy whose future now presumably depends on its submission to democracy.

Four institutions administer the Community: the Court of Justice, the intergovernmental Council of Ministers, the Commission -- whose members are supposed to shed national loyalties -- and the Parliament. Despite its high-sounding name, this Parliament has few legislative powers, and is not even directly elected. Its ambiguous status reflects the incomplete evolution of the Community -- established by elitists and now facing the dangerous turning point of popular legislative control.

On April 18, 1951, Belgium, France, Germany, Italy, Luxembourg, and the Netherlands joined to form the European Coal and Steel Community (ECSC). The Treaty of Paris set up an international institution with real but narrow powers to oversee coal and steel production in the six signatory countries. Its High Authority was to be publicly accountable to a "Common Assembly."

First Meeting

The seventy-eight members first met in Strasbourg on September 10, 1952. France, Germany, and Italy each had eighteen representatives; Belgium and the Netherlands, ten apiece, and Luxembourg, four.

When the Common Market and Euratom Treaties were being negotiated in 1955-57, the Common Assembly proposed that it should be transformed into a new and larger body representing all three Communities. This proposal was adopted. The "European Parliamentary Assembly" held its first session on March 19, 1958. The name was changed to "European Parliament" in 1962.

The two Rome Treaties on Euratom and the Common Market obligated the six European countries to extend intergovernmental cooperation and supranational authority to nuclear energy and virtually all economic fields. And, of course, there was the dream of the future: the Common Market Treaty decreed "an ever closer union among the European peoples." As this ideal union comes closer, the role of the European Parliament becomes the central "institutional" issue.

Structured for Supranationalism

At present, the unit consists of 142 members -- thirty-six each from France, Germany, and Italy, fourteen each from Belgium and the Netherlands, and six from Luxembourg. Members of national legislatures are selected by their peers to serve in the European Parliament -- a part-time function.

Once at Strasbourg, however, they are not grouped in national delegations but in four broad-based parties: Christian Democrats, Socialists, Liberals (a term which in continental Europe means economic conservatives), and the European Democratic Union (French Gaullists). There are a few "unaffiliated" members -- Italian Communists. Only occasionally do members vote a "national" rather than a party line.

The Council of Ministers consists of representatives of the national governments of the day -- the parties in power. The Commission members are appointed by the respective national governments. But because the EC is not only a community of governments but also peoples, the European Parliament gives opposition parties a voice.

The question remains: What do European Parliamentarians represent? The EEC Treaty states that the European Parliament "shall be composed of representatives of the peoples of the States united within the Community." At present, European Parliament members are neither instructed by their respective national governments nor have they any clear "European" mandate from their electorates.

Procedure resembles that of most parliaments anywhere. Twelve standing committees are comparable in function to congressional committees in the United States, preparing the groundwork for debates. The committees maintain regular contact with the Commission -- the EC's administrative arm. Since the committees meet in camera, the Commission can speak with candor not only about day-to-day decisions but also about future plans. Committee members may also go on fact-finding missions in Community countries.

The European Parliament holds several week-long plenary sessions every year, usually in the Europe House in Strasbourg, France. No permanent meeting place has yet been selected. The Parliament Secretariat is in Luxembourg. Debates are conducted in the four official languages of the Community -- Dutch, French, German, and Italian. The plenary sessions, in contrast to the committee meetings, are usually public.

The greatest power specifically granted the Parliament by the EEC Treaty has never yet been used -- the power to censure and force the resignation of the Commission by a two-thirds vote, involving a majority of all Parliament members.

Immune to Censure

In theory, this parliamentary principle that the government resigns if it loses a confidence vote ensures democratic control over policy. But the Council, the Community's key decision-making institution, remains immune to censure.

Although appointed by the six governments, Commission members are answerable only to the EC Parliament. Commission and Parliament are thus allied in their anti-national, "Community" interest.

The EEC Treaty explicitly grants Parliament virtually no legislative or budgetary authority -- only a consultative role. Even here, the pact is vague, for the Council of Ministers often makes decisions without consulting Parliament. In the field of finance, the Treaty only empowers the Parliament to draft estimates of its own expenditures and propose amendments to the whole budgetary draft. The real budgetary power lies with the Council.

Financial Resources

In 1970, however, the Council decided to grant the Community its own system of financial resources, independent of the six member countries. A logical extension of this financial independence was to give Parliament some budget control. The sums in question are only about five per cent of total appropriations, but they are critical -- the financing of Community institutions. After 1974, the Parliament will have complete control over this section.

Democratic budgeting control by popularly elected representatives is seen as part of the "democratization" process -- essential to the ultimate goal of a united Europe. This process is, of course, incomplete while the Parliament's powers are limited and its members not directly elected. The debate on this lively issue now is going on in most of Europe's capitals.