

# European elections, 1979

Polling day in the United Kingdom for the first direct elections to the European Parliament will be Thursday, June 7, 1979. Other countries of the European Community (sometimes called the Common Market) will be voting over the four-day period to Sunday, June 10; and the results should be known early on Monday, June 11. These dates were at last decided by the European Council ('summit') on April 7, 1978.

The arrangements for the elections at European level were fixed, in principle, in September 1976.

- The elected Parliament will have 410 members.
- France, Germany, Italy and the United Kingdom will have 81 seats each; the Netherlands 25; Belgium 24; Denmark 16; Ireland 15; and Luxembourg 6.
- The Parliament will be elected for a fixed term of five years (i.e. the second elections will be in June 1984).
- For at least the first elections, each country will decide on its own system of voting.
- For later elections, however, a common voting system will be devised.

- The elections will be held at the same time in all countries, within a period from a Thursday to the following Sunday. Each country will choose to poll on one of these days; but the count will not begin until the last polling station has closed.
- Members of national parliaments will be able to stand for and sit in the elected European Parliament.

The nine Community countries are now in the process of ratifying these arrangements and passing the necessary electoral laws. France, Italy, Germany, the Netherlands, Belgium, Denmark and Luxembourg will use Proportional Representation, either with national or regional party lists. Ireland will use the Single Transferable Vote.

In the United Kingdom, the electoral arrangements are contained in the European Assembly Elections Act, 1978.

- The 81 seats will be distributed:
 

England	66
Scotland	8
Wales	4
N. Ireland	3
- England, Scotland and Wales will be divided into single-member seats, with election by simple majority ('first-past-the-post').

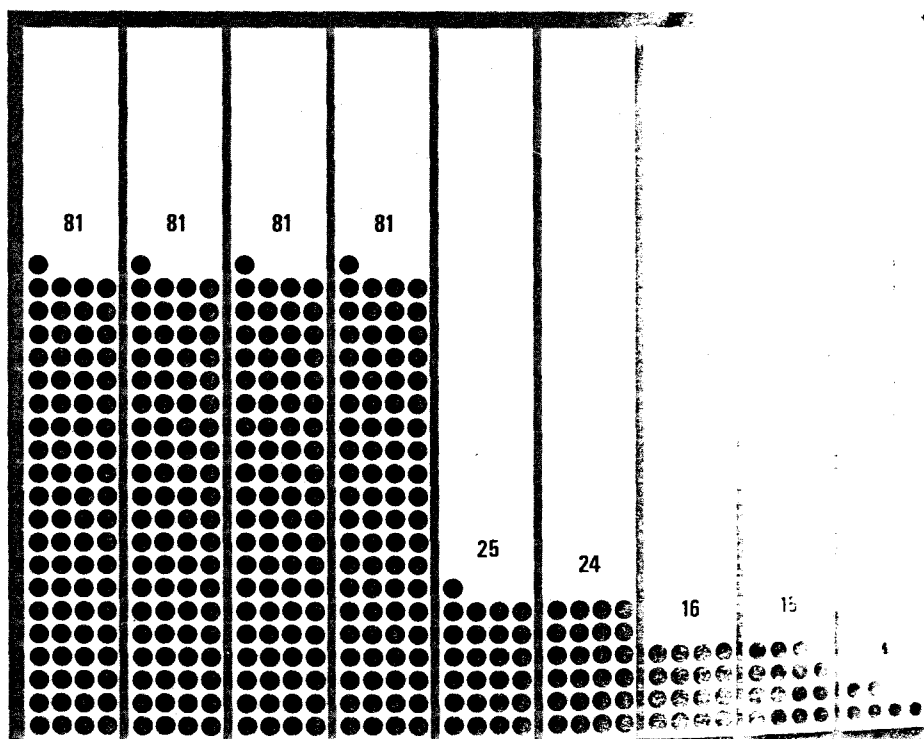
- Northern Ireland will be a three-member seat with voting by Single Transferable Vote.
- Only those on the normal electors register (including peers) will be able to vote.
- But, unlike elections to Westminster, it will be possible for peers and ministers of religion to stand.
- The Parliamentary Boundary Commissions have the task of dividing England, Scotland and Wales into constituencies. Suggested boundaries for England and Wales were published on May 21, 1978; suggestions for Scotland on June 5, 1978.
- These 'Euro'-constituencies will consist of roughly 8 House of Commons constituencies grouped together.
- A final decision on the boundaries will be taken by the House of Commons probably before the elections.
- Westminster will continue to elect such matters as Ministers and depositors nomination.

## Parliament's Powers

The formal powers of the European Parliament after the elections will be exactly the same as those of the present Parliament, described in this booklet.

Indeed, the British European Assembly Elections Act specifically states that the European Parliament's powers can only be extended in the future if Westminster passes a British Act of Parliament saying so.

The French legislation on the elections contains a provision to the same effect.



## What does it do?

The Common Market has four main institutions.

**The Commission** makes proposals for action and, when a decision to act has been taken, sees that it is carried out.

**The Council of Ministers** is the ultimate decision-taking body. It represents the national governments.

**The Court of Justice** is the final court of appeal in any case covered by the Common Market treaties.

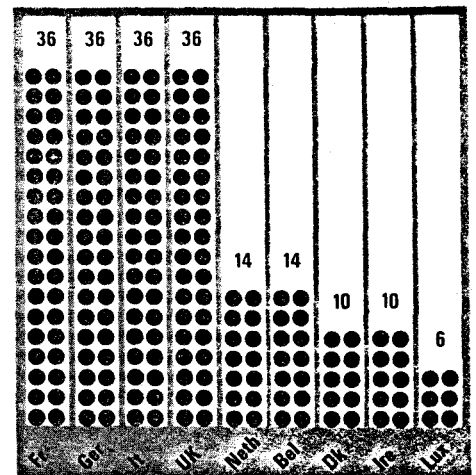
**The Parliament's function** is to exercise democratic control over these institutions and over the legislative process.

## Who are the Members now?

The present European Parliament has 198 Members, of whom the United Kingdom is entitled to 36. (See diagram.)

The Members of the Parliament are not yet directly elected. Instead, they are nominated by the various parliaments of the member States from among their own ranks — in the case of the United Kingdom, from both the Commons and the Lords.

Britain's delegation (in May 1978) comprises 18 Labour Members (12 from the Commons, 6 from the Lords), 16 Conservatives (12 from the Commons, 4 from the Lords), 1 Liberal (from the Commons) and 1 Scottish National Party MP from the Commons. (For individual names see back page.)



## How does it work?

The European Parliament does not sit in continuous full session — that would be impossible so long as its Members also have national parliamentary responsibilities. Instead sessions are held for, on average, one week in each month.

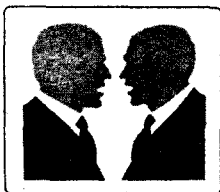
These full meetings, however, are only a small — though the most public — part of the Parliament's work. In order to carry out the detailed scrutiny of Community affairs, and to reflect the political opinions of the European public, the Parliament is organised in two key ways:

- specialised standing committees;
- political groups.

## The Committees

Unlike Parliament at Westminster — but very like county, district and borough councils in Britain — the major working unit of the European Parliament is the specialised committee. The committees work, roughly, on a fortnightly cycle, and one committee or another is in session on almost every working day of the year. As in the case of local councils, this is where the bulk of the Parliament's work originates: the full sessions are largely taken up with debates on reports from the committees. Like Congressional committees in the United States, the committees also hold special

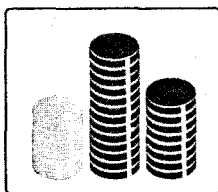
'investigatory' meetings on particular problems, questioning Community officials and outside experts — a procedure now growing in importance. Committees also make on-the-spot enquiries into local problems. The Regional Policy and Transport Committee, for instance, has visited Ireland, both North and South, to examine possibilities for regional development; and has toured British ports and development areas.



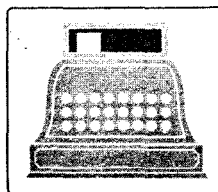
Political affairs



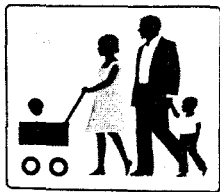
Legal affairs



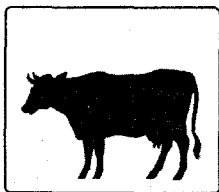
Economic and monetary affairs



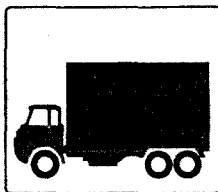
Budgets



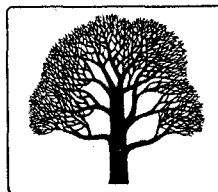
Social affairs, employment and education



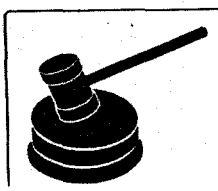
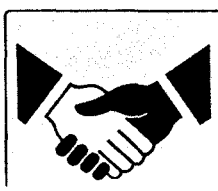
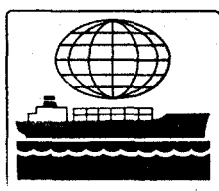
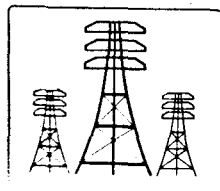
Agriculture



Regional policy, regional planning and transport



Environment, public health and consumer protection



# The political groups

A visitor to the European Parliament in full session will find the Members seated, not on opposite sides of the Chamber as at Westminster, but in a continuous semi-circle facing the President's chair. This does not mean, however, that there is no party system. On the contrary, major powers within the Parliament are wielded by the second key units: the political groups.

An official political group within the European Parliament must consist of at least 14 Members (or of 10 Members provided they are drawn from three or more countries). At present there are six groups:

- Communists and Allies
- Socialists
- Christian Democrats (People's Party)
- European Progressive Democrats
- European Conservatives
- Liberals and Democrats

In addition, there are a few independent Members.

Country	Com	Soc	C-D	EPD	Con	Lib	Ind	Total
Belgium		5	7			2		14
Denmark	1	4		2	2	1		10
France	5	10	3	9		9		36
Germany		15	18			3		36
Ireland		1	3	6				10
Italy	12	5	15			2	2	36
Luxembourg		2	2			2		6
Netherlands		6	5			3		14
United Kingdom					16	1	1	36
<b>Total</b>		18	66	53	17	18	23	3198

During full sessions Members sit in these party groups — *not* in national delegations — with the Liberals, from the viewpoint of the President (or Speaker), on the right and the Communists on the left. At present the Socialists are the largest group, including 18 British

Labour Members headed by John Prescott.

The larger the group, the greater the say it has in, for example, choosing the chairmen of committees. These considerations are also of major significance in deciding who is to prepare and present reports.

Spokesmen from the political groups have priority in debates. In addition, the organisation of the Parliament's business — for example, the agenda for plenary sessions — is determined by the 'enlarged Bureau' of the Parliament: the President, the 12 Vice-Presidents (appointed on the basis of party balance) and the political group leaders.

Each political group has a permanent secretariat based in Luxembourg, who help in the preparation of policies, political research, etc. These secretariats are paid for directly out of the Parliament's own budget.



Emilio Colombo  
President



Giorgio Amendola  
Communists and Allies



Ludwig Fellermaier  
Socialists



Egon Klepsch  
Christian Democrats



Geoffrey Rippon  
European Conservatives



Christian de la Malène  
European Progressive Democrats



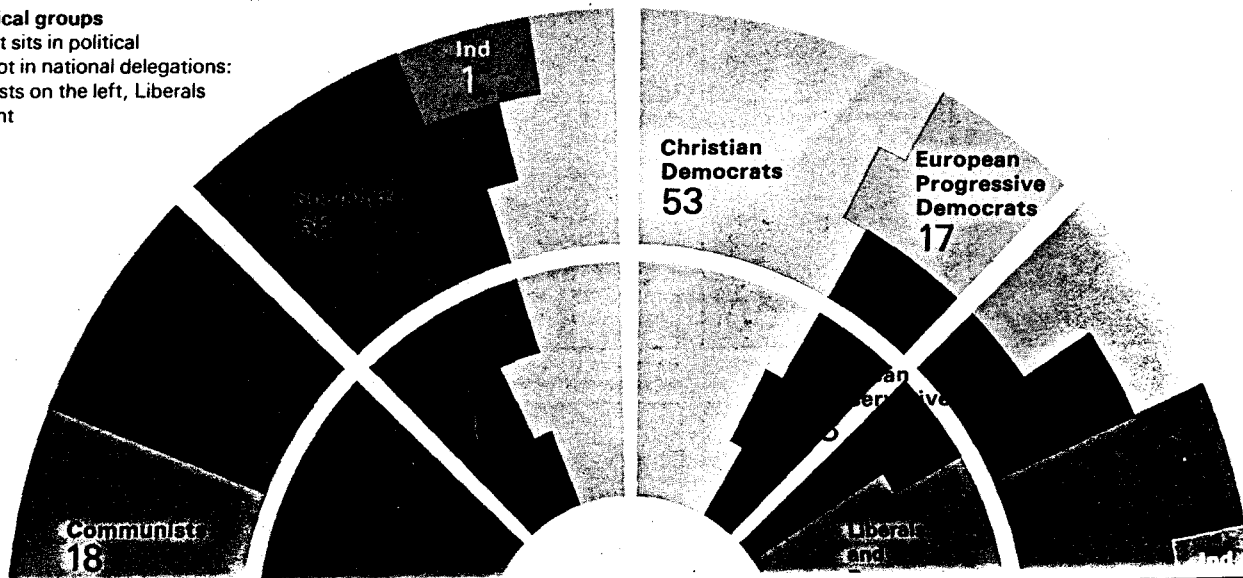
Jean-François Pintat  
Liberals and Democrats

The President of the Parliament is elected for a one-year, renewable term

The political group leaders are elected by their respective groups

## The political groups

Parliament sits in political groups, not in national delegations: Communists on the left, Liberals on the right



# Community laws

Parliament's formal role in the process of Community legislation is for the most part consultative. Before reaching a final decision on a Commission proposal, the Council of Ministers almost always consults the Parliament. But the treaties do not oblige the Council to take any notice!

Parliament's real role in the legislative process, however, is very much more influential than this procedure would lead one to believe. The Treaties enable the Commission to alter its proposals at any time before the Council has reached a final decision. So it is primarily through its influence over the Commission that Parliament is able to amend and even initiate legislation.

Community laws are made in five stages.

**1 Preparation of proposals.** This is formally the prerogative of the Commission. In practice, there are often consultations at a very early stage between the responsible department of the Commission and the appropriate parliamentary committee. It is also possible for the committee itself to propose legislation through an 'own initiative' report, calling on the Commission to take action. The real influence of MPs over the preparation of legislation is even greater in the

European Parliament than at Westminster, where Members usually see draft laws only when fully-detailed bills are put before the House.

**2 Reference to the Parliament by the Council.** When the Commission has drafted its proposals formally, it submits them to the Council. Immediately, the Council forwards them to the Parliament for its opinion.

**3 The committee stage.** The proposal then goes directly into one of the twelve specialised committees, where a *rappporteur* is appointed to prepare a draft opinion and amendments. Each of the political groups is likely to hold parallel meetings to determine an appropriate 'party line'.

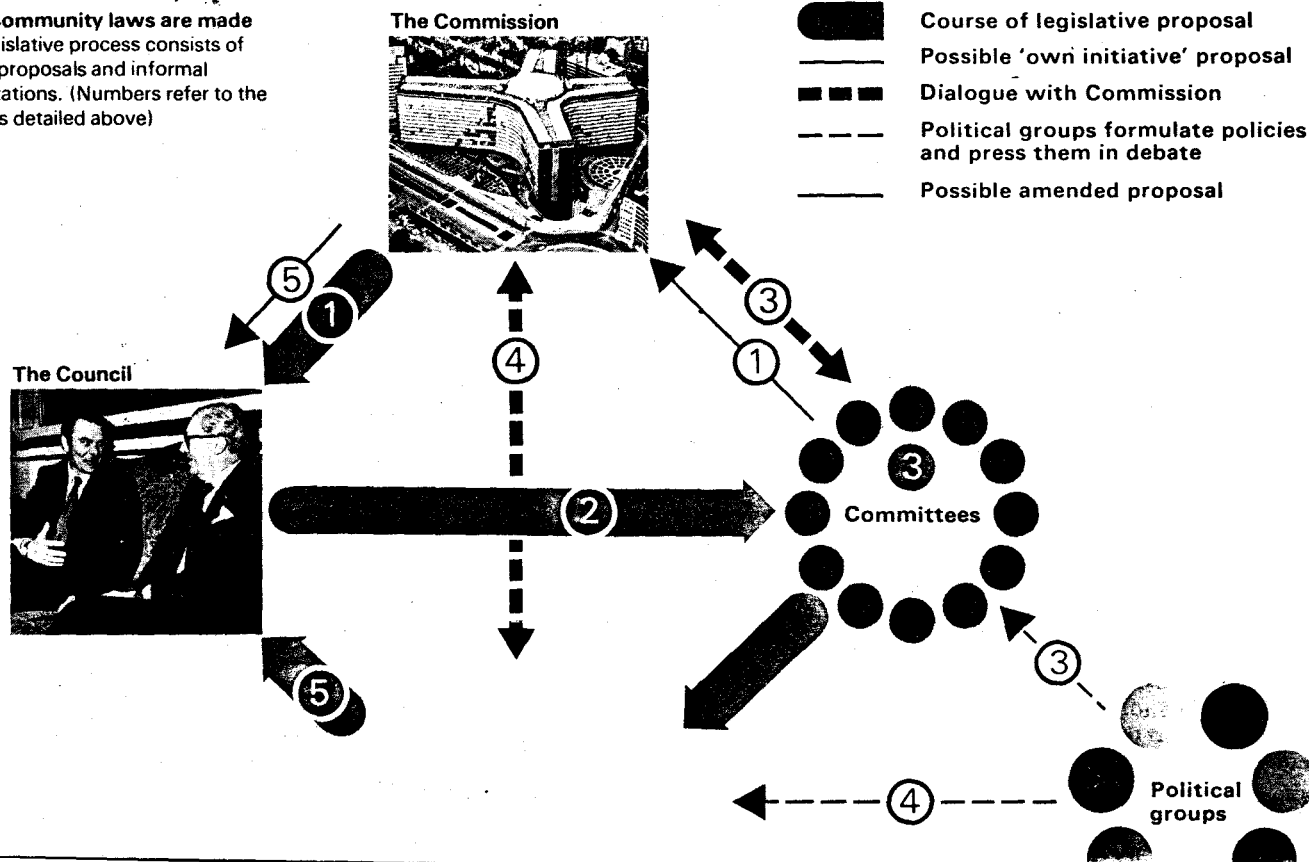
The committee stage of legislation in the European Parliament, as compared to that at Westminster, is remarkable for the detailed involvement of the Commission. On one side of the table sit the committee members; on the other the Commission officials — and perhaps the Commissioner responsible for the field concerned — who have to explain and defend their proposals. Interest groups who may not have brought their point of view to the attention of the Commission at an earlier stage can do so here by briefing members of the committee or, on occasion, at committee 'hearings'.

**4 Report to the House.** The Committee's final report is presented by the *rappporteur* for debate in the Parliament as a whole at one of the monthly 'plenary' sessions. Further amendments can still be presented; and the Commissioner responsible is usually asked to reply to the debate. (Representatives of the Council of Ministers are often present as well, and may speak.) The debate ends with a vote on the formal resolution contained in the report. Individual Members are a great deal less subject to party 'whips' than at Westminster.

**5 Return to Council.** The 'opinion' (i.e. the resolution) of Parliament is then sent to the Council. Meanwhile, however, the Commission will usually incorporate the Parliamentary Committee's findings into its own proposals; and it is on these that the Council has to decide.

## How Community laws are made

The legislative process consists of formal proposals and informal consultations. (Numbers refer to the 5 stages detailed above)



# What power has the Parliament?

National parliaments usually possess three main powers:

- to dismiss the government;
- to grant or withhold supply: i.e., vote the budget;
- to participate in law-making.

Although there is no true Community government, the European Parliament already has, in some measure, each of these rights.

First, Parliament can dismiss the 13 Commissioners. To do so it must pass a motion of censure by a two-thirds majority, and with over half the Members (i.e., over 99) voting in favour. So far, Parliament has no say in their appointment, which is the responsibility of the national governments. But the Commission is responsible to the Parliament for its actions and policies — this is why individual Commissioners take part in the debates of Parliament and its committees.

Second, Parliament is steadily increasing its control over the Community's budget — some £8,250 million in 1978. Until recently, Parliament had a say over only 3 per cent of the total. Now Parliament is able:

- 1 to have the last word on all 'non-obligatory' items: about 25 per cent of the total;
- 2 to reject the budget as a whole.

In the event of a disagreement between Parliament and the Council of Ministers there is a formal conciliation procedure.

Parliament has also pressed for better financial control in the Community to stop, for instance, fraudulent claims for agricultural subsidies. At its insistence, a new Community institution — the Court of Auditors — has been set up to supervise how Community taxpayers' money is spent.

Finally, Parliament has the formal role in Community law-making already

described. In addition, there have been in recent years the first steps towards a true system of Parliament-Council 'co-decision' (much as the Houses of Commons and Lords share legislative power in Britain). A conciliation procedure now exists not only for passing the Community budget, but also for all legislation with budgetary consequences. Joint meetings of the Council and delegations from Parliament are taking place on both budgetary and non-budgetary matters.

Parliament's powers are likely to be steadily extended in the future. The summit conference in December 1974 decided, in particular, to increase Parliament's competence in the Community's legislative process.

# What power have the Members?

In national parliaments, the power of the individual Member rests chiefly on the ability:

- to extract information from the powers that be; and
- to raise in public debate viewpoints, issues and scandals.

This is also true of the individual European Parliament Members.

Parliament has from the beginning been able to debate any matter covered by the Community Treaties. In addition, it has established the right to raise other subjects: for instance, foreign policy and defence. Since 1970 the 'Davignon Committee' of representatives from member States' foreign offices has reported to the Parliament's Political Affairs Committee, as has the Council of Foreign Ministers. The Parliament has established formal links with the parliaments of the countries (over 50) associated with the Community; and with the United States Congress, the Canadian Parliament and the Latin-American parliaments.

A number of ways exist in which Members may question, in public, both the Commission and the Council of Ministers, and raise matters for debate.

**Question Time in plenary sessions.** As at Westminster, the real sting lies in the oral 'supplementary questions' to

cannot prepare the answers in advance.

**Oral questions, usually with debate, at plenary sessions.** These form the second most numerous items on the agenda, and provide a mechanism for holding short discussions on matters of topical interest, rather like 'adjournment debates' in the House of Commons. Topics discussed have varied, for example, from European defence or Chile, to the protection of migrating wild birds.

**Motions for debate.** These are usually referred to the appropriate committee, but can be held immediately in plenary session if urgent. Any five Members can also institute an emergency debate at the end of question time.

**Written questions.** At any time a Member may table such a question to either Council or Commission. The answers are published in the publicly-available *Official Journal of the Community*. Last year, Members put down 878 written questions.

**Questionnaires.** Parliament's committees are making increasing use of detailed questionnaires to the Commission or Council. One recent example put 62 questions to the Commission on the activities of the

# What power have you?

If you, as a member of the public, have a problem, you have several routes to the European Parliament.

**First**, you can get in touch with an individual MP: in the case of the UK through the Commons or the Lords.

**Secondly**, you can make contact through the secretariat of a political group — virtually every point of view in the European political spectrum is catered for.

**Thirdly**, on specific matters, you can contact the appropriate committee; its chairman; or the *rapporteur* responsible.

Or, **fourthly**, you can petition the Parliament as a whole by writing to its President. Any individual or group can submit a petition — even those from countries outside the Community — if it deals with matters for which the Community has a responsibility.

All full sessions of the Parliament are open to the general public, and visitors are always welcome.

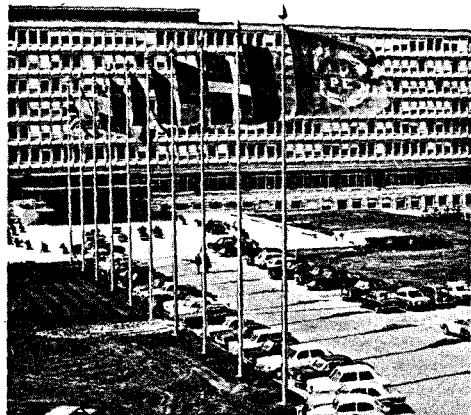
# Where is it?

The provisional headquarters of the Parliament is in Luxembourg, the smallest of the nine Common Market countries. A great deal of the Parliament's work, however, is carried out in the French city of Strasbourg, where half the full sessions take place; and in Brussels, where parliamentary

committees meet. Committees and political groups also visit most other parts of the Community — for example, the Socialist Group recently held a meeting at Newcastle upon Tyne. The Parliament's meeting place in Strasbourg is the Palace of Europe, opened at the beginning of 1977 as the

headquarters of the Council of Europe (an organisation of 20 member countries quite separate from the Common Market) and which the two institutions still share.

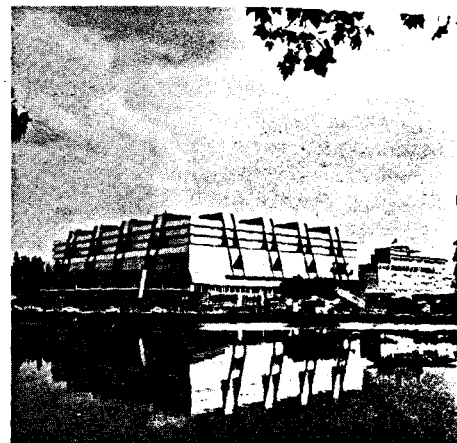
In addition, the Parliament has an information office for each country.



European Parliament Headquarters in Luxembourg



Parliament in session in Strasbourg



The Palace of Europe in Strasbourg

## Languages

One major problem for the European Parliament is language. There are at least a dozen vernacular languages within the Community. Fortunately, only six are officially spoken within the Parliament: English, French, German, Italian, Dutch and Danish.

However, if you visit a plenary session of the Parliament you will not have to understand the six languages: simultaneous interpretation is provided through headphones. All documents are also translated into the six languages, and can be recognised by a colour code: English/purple; French/blue; German/yellow; Italian/green; Dutch/orange; Danish/pink.

## Documents

Reports of the debates in the European Parliament can be obtained in a number of forms. A verbatim transcript — called the 'rainbow' because each speech is in the language in which it was delivered — is published by the Parliament within a day, like Westminster's Hansard. About a month later the official text, translated fully into English, appears as an Annex to the Community's Official Journal. These documents may be consulted at the London office and the Annex can be obtained regularly by subscription through HMSO at £19.20 a year plus postage, and about £4 each.

In addition, the London office itself publishes a selective 'European Parliament Report' within about a week. This can be obtained free on request.

The reports of committees and other Parliament documents are not usually available to the public until they come up for debate in full session. From time to time, however, the Parliament or one of its committees produces a report especially for public discussion.

