

The European Community and its Institutions

Background

Facing a Europe devastated by the Second World War, a visionary group of European politicians including Jean Monnet, Robert Schuman and Konrad Adenauer resolved to help prevent another major conflict by laying the foundation of a Europe that would be united and free from nationalism and rancour. Europe would be constructed in stages, "brick by brick," and in a way that it could not be torn down.

The goal of the European Community was economic, and then political, reconciliation among the peoples of Europe. This would be achieved through community institutions on which Europe would be founded.

Originally these institutions were designated in terms of "communities." These were the European Coal and Steel Community (ECSC), established in 1951; the European Economic Community (EEC), founded in 1957 by the Treaty of Rome; and the European Atomic Energy Community (EURATOM), whose treaty was also signed in 1957.

By 1967, the three institutions were increasingly being perceived as part of a single "community" and were combined under a single council of ministers and a single commission in charge of applying their treaties.

Institutions

Commission of the European Communities

The Commission of the European Communities is divided into 22 branches which, like government departments, deal with sectoral fields. The commission's role is to see that the terms of treaties are applied; to formulate recommendations or opinions concerning the treaties; to participate in preparing the work of the Council of Ministers and of the European Parliament; and to exercise the mandate conferred by the Council of Ministers.

European Council

The European Council comprises heads of state and government of the member states. It meets at least twice a year in the capital of the country holding the presidency of the Council of Ministers (the presidency alternates every six months among the member states). The council discusses internal and foreign policy issues.

Council of Ministers

The Council of Ministers co-ordinates general economic policies of the member countries and makes decisions on applying treaties. Cabinet ministers in the government of each member state take turns as council members according to the subject being discussed. The foreign affairs, economic, finance and agriculture councils normally meet once a month.

European Parliament

The European Parliament advises on community legislation, examines the budget, and exercises democratic control over the executive bodies of the communities, the Council of Ministers and the commission.

Court of Justice

The Court of Justice sees that the laws are observed when treaties establishing the communities are applied and interpreted, and when rulings by the Council of Ministers or the commission are implemented. The 13 judges and six advocates-general are appointed by member states for renewable terms of six years.

Court of Auditors

The Court of Auditors controls the budget. It consists of 12 members appointed for six years by the Council of Ministers. It examines the legality and regularity of the community's receipts and expenditures and the budget's financial management.