

Part Three:

The Operation of the European Union Institutions

The Operation of the Council of the European Union

The Council of the European Union performs important functions within the Union. It

- represents the Member States at the Ministerial level;
- ensures that the objectives of the Treaties are reached;
- guarantees consistency and continuity of Union's external activities;
- coordinates the general economic policies of the Member States;
- is the highest decision-making authority;
- approves legislation proposals and delegates administration oversight to the Commission;
- has a central role in the CFSP and JHA.

The Presidency

Each Member State holds the Union Presidency, and thus the Presidency of the Council, for a six-month term (*see Appendix X, page 51*). During this period, the Member State holding the Presidency can have a substantial political influence – the Presidency, with the cooperation of the Council's General Secretariat, determines priorities, sets and manages the agenda for the ensuing six months.

The Meetings

The Council of the European Union, with varying frequency, holds meetings in all of the following areas:

- agriculture; budget; consumer affairs and protection; cultural affairs; development cooperation; education; energy; environment; fisheries; health; immigration; industry; judicial affairs; labour and social affairs; research; telecommunications; tourism and transport.

Its practice is to allocate the responsibility among a

number of councils which specifically address matters associated with the different subject areas. The senior Council within this structure is the General Affairs Council which brings together the Foreign Ministers as the primary representatives of each of the Member States. The General Affairs Council acts as overall arbiter in Community areas such as agriculture, economics, finance, social affairs and foreign policy in addition to its general policy role. Other prominent councils are the Ecofin Council, which is generally attended by Member States' Economic and Finance Ministers and the Council of Agriculture Ministers.

Meetings are convened by the President of the Council of the European Union, either on his own initiative, or at the request of a Member State or the Commission. The timetable of Council meetings is planned in advance and papers raising the matters to be considered are circulated prior to the meetings. The schedule of Council meetings varies according to the subject area, for example: General Affairs, Ecofin and Agriculture meet on a monthly basis; the Internal Market Council generally meets four or five times a year; while the Consumer Affairs and Industrial Councils may meet only twice yearly.

Council meetings are closed and the proceedings are not reported although minutes are kept. Members of the European Commission may attend, by invitation, to discuss its proposals with the Council. To address the widespread call for greater transparency to Council's operations as the final legislative institution, voting – which has previously been confidential – and the conclusions reached at Council meetings are made available to the public.

The Permanent General Secretariat

The Council Presidency is responsible for overseeing the management and organisation of Council business. To this end, the Presidency is assisted by the administrative, legal and linguistic services of the Council's General Secretariat permanently based in Brussels.

The General Secretariat gives all necessary support to the activities of the Council, the Committee of Permanent Representatives (Coreper), and all other committees or groups created within the Council. The Secretariat is under the direction of the Secretary-General, appointed by unanimous agreement of the Council. The Secretary-General is of great importance to the Council and Community structure. The Secretary-General oversees the preparation for, and attends, all meetings of the General Affairs Council and the Coreper, with the aim of keeping the Council's workload down to matters which cannot otherwise be