

Introduction

The EU was founded on the principle that its members would strive towards 'ever closer union'. This has created a process of integration – meaning that member states have agreed to allow many policy decisions to be made at a European level instead of by their own national governments. This is a controversial idea because it means taking powers away from national governments, such as the British Government in Westminster, and handing them to the Brussels-based EU institutions. The EU is based on a series of treaties and each of these has allowed for the extension of integration into more areas, although a full European government has not been created.

Why is the EU so different?

The Treaty of Rome (1957) looked to make countries relate with each other in a different way based on supranationalism. It created a system of European government that was based on the idea that countries should hand over sovereignty on certain issues and that this would allow them to achieve things that they could not achieve on their own. Its authors created two new mechanisms to achieve this. The first was a European Commission that had some of the powers of a national government. The second was the idea of Qualified Majority Voting (QMV), which meant that not all members had to agree on a policy in order for it to be passed.

The EU is different because until 1958 the governments of nation states had always been ultimately responsible for all decisions about their countries' affairs. This was their sovereign right. Since 1958, national governments have allowed decision-making power on many areas to pass to the EU institutions. Nevertheless, member states retain power through the European Council. This means it isn't really a supranational government, but a cross between that and an intergovernmental organisation like the United Nations in which sovereign states come together to agree to do things in the same way but don't give up any sovereignty.

History

The two key architects of this vision of a European government were Frenchmen – Robert Schuman and Jean Monnet. After World War II, they wanted to make sure that the countries of Europe (particularly France and Germany) could never go to war again. They thought that the best way to do this was to make them dependent on each other. If these two big European countries – and their neighbours – relied upon each other for trade in coal and steel (the main components needed to produce weapons), and food, fuel and other goods, then they would not want to go to war.

In drawing up their plans for a European government, they were influenced by the model of the US government. The USA is a federal state: the power to make decisions is split between the fifty States that make up the Union, and the national government in Washington DC. This is very similar to the vision that Monnet and others had for a United Europe, although the EU project has not reached this ultimate goal.

A Europe of Nation States

Monnet's vision of a United Europe has never been shared by all the leaders of the member states. The most vocal opponent to supranationalism in the Community's history was Charles de Gaulle, who was French President during the 1960s. He wanted to see a 'Europe of Nation States' in which countries co-operated but didn't hand over their sovereignty. This has also been a very popular idea in Britain; former Prime Minister, Tony Blair, said he wanted to see a Europe of sovereign nations. However, those who argue against the idea of a United States of Europe feel that it would destroy the individual character of their countries.

Making decisions in the EU

In general, decisions must be agreed by the Council of the European Union, the Commission and the European Parliament. Since the Lisbon Treaty (2007), the standard voting system in the Council of the European Union is Qualified Majority Voting. This means that in order to be passed, a proposal must be backed by a majority (55%) of member states, with countries supporting the proposal representing at least 65% of the total EU population. In some important areas, however, such as tax and foreign affairs, all countries have to agree. In these areas each member state has the right to veto decisions it opposes. The Lisbon Treaty increased the use of QMV, removing states' right to veto in over 30 policy areas. However, national vetoes remain in tax, foreign and defence policy. Furthermore, Britain negotiated the right to 'opt-out' of certain policy areas now covered by QMV, including Justice and Home Affairs.

"The sovereign nations of the past cannot solve the problems of the present: they cannot ensure their own progress or their own future."

Jean Monnet

"We want a Europe of sovereign nations, countries proud of their own distinctive identity, but co-operating together for mutual good."

Tony Blair, 2002

Terms

- ❖ **Supranationalism:** a form of organisation through which decisions are made by international institutions, not by individual states.
- ❖ **Sovereignty:** having the ultimate power to make decisions about your country.
- ❖ **Intergovernmental:** a form of international organisation where governments work together to achieve shared goals.
- ❖ **Veto:** The right of one country to block a decision.