

# The European Commission

The Commission is the driving force of the EU and has many different responsibilities. It is the only institution that has the power to propose EU laws and is also responsible for enforcing them. It operates at a *supranational* level and manages much of the day-to-day running of the EU. It has the financial powers to draft the EU budget and distribute EU money to member states. It also has a role representing all the members collectively in the negotiation of treaties and the enlargement of the EU. It sits in on all decisions made about common foreign, justice and home affairs policy and when members don't implement EU law, it can take legal action against them. It has often been a focus for public attention because of its far reaching powers and the fact that it is not directly accountable to the electorate, leading to claims of a *democratic deficit*.

## History

The Commission was set up under the articles of the Treaty of Rome (1957) giving it wide ranging *de facto* powers which it has expanded as the authority of the EU has spread. Its influence has changed over the years, largely depending upon the character of its President. Walter Hallstein (1958-67) is credited with having got the European project off the ground, while Jacques Delors (1985-94) moved the integration process forward rapidly during his Presidency. In the late 1990s, the Commission was mired in scandal surrounding allegations of abuse of power and corruption. In 1999, this led to the mass resignation of Jacques Santer's Commission following pressure from the European Parliament. The current President of the Commission is the Portuguese Commissioner, José Manuel Barroso. He was re-elected in September 2009 to serve for a second term and has said that his agenda will concentrate on making sure the EU survives the global economic crisis as a competitive global actor.

## How does the European Commission work?

The Commission is made up of 27 Commissioners, one from each member state. Each Commissioner is responsible for setting and managing EU policy in a particular area – such as trade, education or transport. The Commissioners serve a term of five years. They are appointed by national governments and then confirmed by a vote in the European Parliament. The UK's Commissioner is currently Baroness Catherine Ashton and she is in charge of foreign policy as the EU's High Representative for Common Foreign and Security Policy (in this post she is also a Vice-President of the Commission). One of the Commissioners is nominated by the European Council to be the President, in order to give leadership to the work of the Commission as a whole.

Over 2,000 permanent EU civil servants based in Brussels carry out the work of the Commission within thirty Directorates-General, which deal with all areas of economic and social policy as well as external affairs, the management of the EU itself and services such as legal

advice and translation. Each Commissioner is supported by his or her own cabinet of advisors.

## Facts and Figures

- The Treaty of Rome emphasises the independence of Commissioners. While they are in the post they must show no allegiance to their home country.

## Arguments

### For

- A powerful central bureaucracy means that member states can come together to create policies that they might not have the will to make on their own.
- The EU is run by experts from all twenty-seven member states who are able to pool their abilities in the Commission. They are above national politics.
- The Commission bureaucracy is relatively small, yet achieves a great deal.

### Against

- The Commission's accountability is unclear because there is no direct election of Commissioners.
- A centralised Commission is distant from European citizens' everyday lives.

## Quotes

*'National parliaments... should be able to show a red card, so the Commission can be blocked in its tendency to over-regulate.'* Frits Bolkestein, Internal Market Commissioner, 1999-2004 (NB: a system of 'yellow cards' and 'orange cards' was introduced in the Lisbon Treaty (2007) through which national parliaments can question the actions of the Commission.)

*'Nothing has really changed and one wonders what this Commission has been doing the past five years...not only the Commission, but also other institutions, such as the Parliament, need a drastic shake-up.'* Paul van Buitenen MEP, 2004

### Technical Terms

**Democratic deficit:** a term describing the lack of accountability to voters in the way the EU operates.

**Supranationalism:** a form of organisation through which decisions are made by international institutions, not by individual states.

**Intergovernmental:** a form of international organisation where governments work together to achieve shared goals.

**De facto:** existing in practise, but not necessarily through law.

### Links

- [http://ec.europa.eu/index\\_en.htm](http://ec.europa.eu/index_en.htm)
- [http://ec.europa.eu/commission\\_2010-2014/index\\_en.htm](http://ec.europa.eu/commission_2010-2014/index_en.htm)