

History of the European Union

The history of the European Union has been marked by periods of rapid change followed by periods of uncertainty: European integration has been an unpredictable process.

Origins of the EU

The European project was an attempt to overcome the nationalist conflicts of the first half of the twentieth century, especially the rivalry between Germany and France that had contributed to both world wars. After 1945, there was a strong will to ensure that war between Germany and France could never again occur. This led to a series of schemes that culminated in the establishment of the European Economic Community (EEC) in 1957, which eventually became the EU. Led in the early 1950s by Frenchmen Robert Schuman and Jean Monnet, the initial plan was for a European Coal and Steel Community (ECSC) that would make France, Germany, the Netherlands, Belgium and Luxembourg co-operate by forcing them to share their coal and steel resources in the rebuilding of western Europe after the war. This created the organisational model of a Commission, Council and Parliament that was adopted by the EEC.

Founding the EU

The EEC was established under the Treaty of Rome in 1957. Primarily, the EEC aimed to extend the principle behind the ECSC to other areas of trade by creating a **customs union**. However, it also had more political ambitions for European integration – described at the start of the Treaty as creating ‘an ever closer union between the peoples of Europe.’

Yet this mixture of economic and political union was not the only option open to European countries in the 1950s. Britain, Switzerland, Austria and the Scandinavian countries were at this time engaged in the European Free Trade Area (EFTA): a looser organisation based on a zone of **free trade** without an external tariff barrier.

The early years of the EEC were principally focused upon developing the customs union. During this period a huge economic boom, led by a dynamic West Germany, created much greater prosperity in western Europe and drove forward the liberalisation of the EEC economy. In 1963, Britain made its first attempt to join, but was rebuffed by the French President Charles De Gaulle. De Gaulle dominated the European Community in the 1960s, fuelling conflict between those who wanted to push forward a political union and those, like himself, who wanted to maintain the identities of nation states.

By the 1970s, when Britain, Ireland and Denmark finally joined the EEC, the project had slowed down considerably. Although the 1970s saw the first proposals for monetary union, the EEC of nine found it more difficult to reach agreement than the original six had.

Faster integration

It was not until the mid-1980s, at the time when Spain, Greece and Portugal joined, that the pace of European integration really picked up again with the agreement of the Single European Act (1986). This laid down a timetable for the completion of the single market while looking towards creating monetary union and driving forward the agenda for political union.

The fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 and the reunification of Germany in 1990 provided a huge boost to this process. In 1992, the Maastricht Treaty transformed the European Community – turning it into the European Union (EU), giving it new roles in the areas of foreign and domestic policy, and setting a timetable for the creation of the Euro. Subsequently, the Treaties of Amsterdam (1997) and Nice (2001) expanded these powers.

History in the making?

The EU is currently at a moment of important change. An EU constitution was drafted in 2004, in the same year as ten new countries joined the EU. However, in 2005 it was rejected in referendums in France and the Netherlands. Since then, the ‘constitutional project’ has been revived in the form of the Lisbon Treaty. However following Ireland's rejection of the Treaty at a referendum held in June 2008 it remains to be seen whether this will be ratified by all Member States.

Quotes

‘The solidarity between the two countries established by joint production will show that war between France and Germany becomes not only unthinkable, but materially impossible.’ Robert Schuman, 1950

‘Our community is not a coal and steel producers association. It is the beginning of Europe.’ Jean Monnet, 1970

‘Creating a single European State bound by one constitution is the decisive task of our time.’ Joschka Fischer, German Foreign Minister 1998-2005

Technical Terms

Customs Union: a group of economies with no internal barriers to trade and a common external tariff.

Free Trade: international trade when there is no restriction on the import or export of goods.

Links

- http://europa.eu.int/abc/history/index_en.htm
- <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/europe/3583801.stm>