

EU Institutions

The EU has a complex government structure made up of bodies known collectively as the EU institutions. They are responsible for making EU laws, managing EU projects, distributing funds and deciding the future direction of the EU. They bring together elected representatives, members of national governments and European bureaucrats.

The EU Commission

The Commission is the EU's permanent administration and has many different responsibilities. It is the only institution which has the power to propose EU laws and is also responsible for enforcing them. It writes the EU budget and distributes EU money to members. It also has a role representing all the members collectively in the negotiation of treaties and the expansion of the EU's borders. At the head of the Commission are 27 Commissioners, one from each member state. They are appointed every 5 years, within 6 months of European Parliament elections. Each Commissioner is responsible for setting and managing EU policy in a particular area – such as environment, education or transport. The British Commissioner is currently Baroness Catherine Ashton, who is the EU High Representative for Foreign and Security Policy. One Commissioner is nominated to be the President to give leadership to the work of the whole Commission. The current President is the Portuguese Commissioner, José Manuel Barroso. The work of the Commission is carried out by approximately 38,000 EU civil servants based in Brussels, Luxembourg and other locations in Europe.

The European Council

This institution is made up of the Heads of State and Government of the member states and the President of the Commission (therefore Britain's representative is Prime Minister David Cameron). It meets for summits four times a year to discuss the direction of EU policy and any controversial issues which may arise. The European Council also selects the President of the Commission, based on the results of the elections to the European Parliament. The Lisbon Treaty formally recognised the European Council as an institution of the EU.

Until 2009, the Presidency of the European Council passed between all the governments of the EU on a six-month rotation; when a country held the Presidency, its head of government was the President, for example former UK Prime Minister Tony Blair was President of the European Council for July-December 2005. However, the Lisbon Treaty (2007) established a permanent President of the European Council, currently Herman van Rompuy, former Prime Minister of Belgium. He represents the EU on the world stage. The President must be a non-head of Government and serves a two and a half year term, which can be extended to five years.

The Council of the European Union

This institution is made up of government ministers from all the member states. It meets regularly to discuss new

EU policies. Each country is represented by their minister in charge of the policy area to be discussed. Member states take it in turns to act as President of the Council, when they chair ministerial meetings for six months. However, foreign affairs meetings are permanently led by the EU's High Representative for Foreign and Security Policy, currently Baroness Catherine Ashton. The Council of the EU plays a central role in developing EU legislation, especially in relation to foreign, defence and home affairs policy, and has the power to issue directives. However, it cannot make new laws and for a Council decision to be binding, it must also be agreed by the European Parliament.

The European Parliament

The European Parliament is the only directly elected EU institution. The Parliament meets in Brussels and Strasbourg, as well as having offices in Luxembourg. There are 736 Members of the European Parliament (MEPs). This was reduced from 785 MEPs after the 2009 EU election, and the Lisbon Treaty (2007) limits the number of MEPs to a maximum of 750. The number of MEPs each country has reflects its population. Britain currently has 72 MEPs.

The Parliament is seen as giving democratic legitimacy to the EU, but it does not have the powers of a normal national parliament. It cannot propose legislation. Instead it can only discuss and vote on laws proposed by the Commission. In order for a new EU law to pass, it has to have the support of both the Parliament and the Council of the European Union. The Parliament also has the power to accept or reject Commissioners when they are nominated by member states, and to sack the entire Commission through a vote of censure.

The European Court of Justice

The European Court of Justice (ECJ) is the court that implements EU law. The court is made up of 27 judges and meets in Luxembourg. In areas that are covered by EU law, the ECJ is the highest court in all of the member states. Its judgements can affect not only nations but also individuals and it serves as the judicial arbiter between member states, institutions and individuals in cases relating to EU law. Its rulings cannot be appealed and it outranks national Supreme Courts on EU matters.

Quotes

'The institutions built in the past century... need modernisation and reform'. Peter Mandelson, EU Trade Commissioner, 2004

'[The people of Europe] find... the European institutions often remote and unsympathetic. They ask what Europe does for them'. Tony Blair, British Prime Minister, 1998

'[The Commission is] a bureaucratic monster whose tentacles leave no village untouched and with nothing better to do than chop off every difference and blend it into the European sauce.' Gunther Verheugen, EU Industry Commissioner, 2004-2009

Links

http://europa.eu/about-eu/institutions-bodies/index_en.htm