

Single European Act

The Single European Act (SEA) was the first major attempt made by member states to amend the arrangements made under the Treaty of Rome (1957). Although the European Community had been in operation for nearly thirty years, it had not achieved its aim of a genuine common market. The SEA's main effect was to set a deadline for the creation of a full single market by 1992. It also created *deeper integration* by making it easier to pass laws, strengthening the EU Parliament and laying the basis for a European foreign policy. In these ways it took the process of European integration to a new level, laying the groundwork for the rapid changes of the 1990s and 2000s.

History

By the mid-1980s the European Community had grown to twelve members: France, West Germany, Italy, the Netherlands, Belgium, Luxembourg, Great Britain, Ireland, Denmark, Greece, Spain and Portugal. Although it had produced a large number of directives and regulations, it was having great difficulties in implementing them because the need for consensus made it difficult to move forward with the single market project.

In 1985, British Commissioner Arthur Cockfield produced a report making three hundred recommendations on how the single market could be brought into being. These recommendations led to the signing of a new Single European Act in February 1986, which became effective in July 1987.

What did the Single European Act do?

The SEA swept away restrictive practices in a range of areas of private enterprise as well as for the public sector in order to reach the target of a full single market by 1992. It sought to improve democracy by strengthening the power of the Parliament to discuss new laws, but made it easier for laws to be passed by the Council of Ministers by increasing the number of areas covered by Qualified Majority Voting (QMV). Finally, it laid the tentative basis for the creation of common European Foreign, Justice and Home Affairs policies, which would occur under the Maastricht Treaty (1992).

Opinion has been divided on the impact of the SEA on the direction of the European project. The SEA embodied a vision of a European Community where integration was real and covered a large number of areas. It also made it easier to pass EU legislation by loosening the voting rules in the Council of Ministers, which suggests a vision of ever deeper union. However it also emphasised the role of the European Parliament, and represented a push for deregulation, led by British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher and Commissioner Arthur Cockfield. The latter suggested the EU might have shifted focus to creating a freer, more open market.

Facts and Figures

- The Cockfield Report saw three types of barrier to creating a common market: physical (border controls), technical (rules and regulations) and fiscal (different tax rates). The SEA adopted this framework in its approach to establishing the single market.

Arguments

For

- The SEA was a major effort to push the European Community in a liberalising direction that has benefited everyone in the EU by increasing competition and wealth: it was responsible for creating a genuine common market.
- The SEA introduced more democracy into the Community by strengthening the Parliament.
- The SEA was vital to cope with the changing character of the Community after it had absorbed so many new members.

Against

- The SEA expanded the role of the Commission, thus bringing a United Europe.
- In expanding QMV, the SEA made the EU less accountable to member states by making it easier to pass a law without everyone's agreement.

Quotes

'In ten years, 80% of the laws on the economy and social policy will be passed at a European not the national level.' Jacques Delors, European Commission President, 1985-1995

'We can take pride in the distance travelled. But we must also remember how far we still have to go. The Community is now launching itself on a course for the 1990s, a course which must make it possible for Europe to compete on equal terms with the United States and Japan.... What we need are strengths which we can only find together. We must be stronger in new technologies. We must have the full benefit of a single large market.' Margaret Thatcher, British Prime Minister, 1986

'We want a European Union, we want the United States of Europe.' Helmut Kohl, German Chancellor, 1989

Technical Terms

Deeper integration: the processes whereby member states develop co-operation on more areas of policy.

Links

- http://europa.eu/abc/treaties/index_en.htm
- <http://www.euro-know.org/europages/dictionary/s.html>