

Treaty of Nice

The Treaty of Nice was agreed at the Nice European Council in December 2000. It represented a further attempt by the governments of the member states to find a workable means of moving forward the process of European integration, and to prepare for the coming enlargement of the EU to include ten new members. Negotiations were divided by the re-emergence of old arguments over the benefits of *intergovernmental* as opposed to *supranational* models for the running of the EU. Nevertheless, the final document made significant changes to how the EU should be run in the future.

History

Arguments raged over the future direction of the EU following the Treaty of Amsterdam (1997) as member states tried to reform the Commission and European Council before enlargement. French President Jacques Chirac wanted to see more power given to the European Council and less to rest in the hands of the Commission. Meanwhile, Commission President Romano Prodi argued for the opposite model, while a third and altogether more radical proposal came from German Foreign Minister Joschka Fischer who set out a vision for a parliamentary European Federation.

This was the basis upon which an Inter-Governmental Conference met throughout much of 2000 to discuss the reform of decision-making to prepare for enlargement. The same level of disagreement marked the Nice Summit itself, with the British Prime Minister threatening to veto the treaty if France attempted to push through major reductions in Britain's veto powers. Although agreement was finally reached, few viewed it as a successful process.

What did the Treaty of Nice do?

Much of the text of the Treaty was concerned with reforming the decision-making of the EU. It extended Qualified Majority Voting (QMV) in the European Council and removed national vetoes from thirty-nine areas. It gave the power to elect the Commission President to the European Parliament and gave him the power to sack individual Commissioners.

Looking forward to enlargement it set limits on the numbers of future Commissioners and MEPs, revised the voting powers of the member states in the European Council to give more weight to the largest and formalised the idea of enhanced co-operation first set out in the Treaty of Amsterdam. The Treaty strengthened the Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) by creating special representatives and the idea that the Council should be able to negotiate on behalf of all members at international meetings. Finally, in the 'Declaration on the Future of the European Union', it announced that another Inter-Governmental Conference should be set up to write an EU constitution.

Facts and Figures

- It took three hundred and thirty hours of formal negotiations to arrange the agenda for the Nice Summit.
- The Treaty of Nice decided that once the membership of the EU reached twenty-seven, the number of Commissioners would be capped.

Arguments

For

- The reforms introduced by the Nice Treaty were necessary to prepare for enlargement and to stop the EU administration from growing out of control.
- The Treaty gave more authority to the democratically elected elements of the EU structure – the European Parliament and the European Council.
- The measures that strengthened the Commission were good for small member states because they have more power in the Commission than in European Council.

Against

- By extending QMV, the Treaty moved forward the process of deeper integration.
- Changes to voting in the European Council weakened the position of small member states in favour of large ones.

Quotes

'The present generation should lay the final brick in the edifice of Europe. This is our task and we ought to get down to it.' Tony Blair, British Prime Minister, 2000

'The European Parliament, the Council, the Commission and the Court are our institutions. They provide the guarantees, the checks and balances without which nothing lasting will be built.' Romano Prodi, EU Commission President, 1999-2004

'The EU is on the brink of becoming a European Federation by the year 2010... I feel sure that Britain will fall in line.' Joschka Fischer, German Foreign Minister 1998-2005

Technical Terms

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

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

Links

- http://europa.eu/abc/treaties/index_en.htm
- http://www.cer.org.uk/pdf/policybrief_nicetreaty.pdf