

Introduction

This EU institution is made up of the member states' **heads of state and government** (Britain's representative is Prime Minister David Cameron), the President of the Commission, and it is headed by a President of the European Council (who is a non-head of State). Not to be confused with the Council of Europe, the European Council works alongside the Council of the European Union. It meets for summits up to four times a year to discuss EU policy and any controversial issues that may arise. It seeks to provide leadership to the Council of the European Union and its meetings set the tone of future policy. However, the Council can also be a cause of disagreement, because its desire to set the EU agenda can come into conflict with the leadership role of the EU Commission.

History

Regular meetings of heads of state and governments were set up in 1974. Since then, the European Council has become the EU's most visible decision-taking body owing to its high-profile summit meetings. It has often driven the EU's agenda forward by signing constitutional treaties and making proposals for reform. The European Council became a formal institution of the EU following the implementation of the Lisbon Treaty in 2009.

The Laeken Declaration (2001) set out the agenda for a major expansion of the EU's powers and the creation of an EU Constitution, while the Lisbon Strategy (2000) set out how governments wanted the EU's economic policy to be reformed. However, despite its apparent power, the Council's agenda has often been 'hijacked' by events. For example, the Luxembourg European Council in June 2005 was dominated by discussions of the French referendum rejecting the EU Constitution, and throughout 2008-09, Council summits were dominated by discussion of the global economic down-turn, rather than sticking to the planned topics.

How does the European Council work?

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. 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 2½ year term, which can be extended to 5 years.

During any six month period, the European Council will normally hold one or two full summits. They are intended to be serious but informal, designed to allow back-room deals to be thrashed out quickly.

Decisions in the European Council are made unanimously. This reflects the intergovernmental roots of the organisation. When agreement cannot be reached, the council tries to reach a qualified majority.

The European Council publishes conclusions after its meetings, calling for specific initiatives that the Commission and Council of the European Union are expected to pursue. Indeed, the Council of the European Union and its Secretariat does much of the work leading up to a European Council Summit.

Facts and figures

- ❖ The European Council has been responsible for launching or approving virtually every significant European policy since its inauguration, including the reunification of Germany, the accession of new states, and the selection of countries for the single currency.

Arguments

For

- ❖ The European Council can provide quick and decisive leadership to the whole EU project.
- ❖ The European Council provides more democratically legitimate leadership than the Commission because it is made up of democratically elected leaders.
- ❖ European Council summit meetings provide a level of glamour and gravitas that reflects well on the image of the EU and increases its profile on the world stage.

Against

- ❖ The European Council President is a non-head of state who is appointed and not democratically elected.
- ❖ The Council sets its own rules: leaders meet when they want and the meetings often break up without taking any decisions.
- ❖ In practice, the European Council has huge powers to shape EU development and policy, but the processes that lead to decisions are mainly carried out in private.

“Summits should be held when you have a clear idea of the purpose of the meeting ... I start with a tinge of uncertainty as to whether this meeting will have been entirely necessary.”

Malcolm Rifkind, UK Foreign Secretary, 1996

“[There is a difference between the] Council's readiness to make commitments on the world stage and its willingness to find money to fulfil these commitments.”

Janusz Lewandowski MEP

Technical Terms

- ❖ **Heads of state and government:** in some member states the President is both head of state and head of the government. In others, the head of state does not play an active role in politics and there is a separate Prime Minister.
- ❖ **Intergovernmental:** a form of international organisation where governments work together to achieve shared goals.
- ❖ **Qualified Majority Voting (QMV):** majority (as opposed to unanimous) voting procedure used in the Council of the EU for an increasing number of decisions.

Links

- ❖ <http://www.european-council.europa.eu/home-page.aspx?lang=en>