

Press release issued to mark the 2000th meeting of the Council (Brussels, 17 April 1997)

Caption: This press release, issued on 17 April 1997 to mark the 2000th meeting of the Council of the European Union, held on 21 and 22 April 1997 in Luxembourg, outlines the key dates, events and figures which have played a role in the development of the institution, and, in particular, in its operation, over the past 30 years.

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Press release (Brussels, 17 April 1997)
2000th meeting of the Council on 21 and 22 April 1997 in Luxembourg

It will be in Luxembourg – and in its Agriculture configuration – that the Council of the European Union will hold its 2000th meeting on Monday 21 and Tuesday 22 April 1997.

Although such a number calls for celebration, this Council, in keeping with the institution's habitual sobriety, will essentially be a normal working meeting devoted to various agricultural matters, in particular the fixing of prices for the 1997/1998 marketing year and related measures.

However, in commemoration of the event, the Presidency will give a reception in the evening of 21 April for those attending the meeting, to which journalists present in Luxembourg are also invited.

As on the occasion of any jubilee, attention quite naturally turns to the past history of what may now be termed this "venerable" Council. We note first of all that the present numbering of Council meetings dates only from the entry into force of the "Merger Treaty" on 1 July 1967, which instituted a single Council and a single Commission. Before that date some 460 meetings of the ECSC Council (since 1952) and the EEC and EAEC Councils (since 1958) had already been held.

While it took nearly 18 years (from July 1967 to April 1985) to reach the 1000th meeting – which was also an Agriculture Council meeting in Luxembourg – it took only twelve years to reach the 2000th.

While in 1967 there were only the six founding countries around the Council table with four languages, the later enlargements in 1973 (Denmark, Ireland and the United Kingdom), 1981 (Greece), 1986 (Spain and Portugal) and 1996 (Austria, Finland and Sweden) raised this number to fifteen countries and eleven languages, with a considerable impact on the Council's functioning.

Not only the size of rooms and the numbers of interpreters have had to expand, but in addition the time taken to go round the table hearing each delegation's views in turn is now such that Ministers can only discuss a limited number of subjects in detail at each meeting. The result is that more and more matters must be resolved in the fora which prepare Council meetings.

The development of the activities and specific policies of the Community, and of the Union since 1993, is reflected also in the evolution of the Council itself: the "Merger Treaty" had created a single Council but from the outset it met in specialized configurations, including in particular Foreign (or General) Affairs, Agriculture, Economic Affairs/Finance, Labour and Social Affairs, Transport, Budget – as well as ECSC and Euratom Councils.

This differentiation had already begun within the EEC Council, although at the beginning of the 1960s it had also held joint meetings of Ministers for Foreign Affairs, Economic Affairs/Finance and Agriculture to lay the basis of the Common Agricultural Policy.

Over the years, other specialized configurations such as Research, Energy, Environment, Industry, the Internal Market, Fisheries, Development Cooperation and others have been added. This often occurred when the need was felt for joint action in a given field, either to face new challenges together or to resolve problems arising from industrial change or technological developments. Again, where certain very specific problems had to be addressed (the textile and steel crises, patents, posts and telecommunications, trade negotiations), meetings in an ad hoc configuration were convened.

Other configurations such as Education and Cultural Affairs, Health or Justice only developed later under the heading of intergovernmental cooperation – as meetings of representatives of the Governments of the Member States – in the absence of any relevant provision in the Treaty on these subjects.

It should be pointed out in this connection also that the Ministers for Foreign Affairs met for many years alternately wearing the hat of the Council or that of Political Cooperation. To underline this distinction they

once met during the 1970s on the same day, in Copenhagen in the morning as Political Cooperation and in Brussels in the afternoon as the Council.

With the entry into force of the Maastricht Treaty, these subtle distinctions disappeared for good, as it solidly established the authority of the Council as the single Institution for the three pillars of the new structure, while maintaining separate decision-making procedures for each pillar.

Annex I to this communiqué shows the Council's evolution in its various configurations. From it we see that the annual number of meetings has increased progressively from 20 in 1967 to a peak in 1993 with 96 meetings; since then the figure has stabilized at around 90.

The annual rhythm of Council meetings involves two peak periods: the first, in June, comes at the end of the Presidency of the first six-month period; the second, which often includes an even greater number of meetings, is in December, coinciding with a series of end-of-year deadlines. Ministers for Foreign Affairs, Agriculture and Economic Affairs/Finance meet each month as a rule. Other Councils meet as the matters in question dictate; for the most part once or twice per Presidency.

Although the normal venue for Council meetings is Brussels (or Luxembourg in April, June and October), meetings have also taken place elsewhere: Geneva, Tokyo, Marrakesh and Singapore in the context of the GATT and WTO negotiations, or on-the-spot coordination concerning the activities of international organizations: for example in New York for the UN or in Nairobi for the UNCTAD, or in connection with the Lomé Convention in Fiji, in the Bahamas, in Lomé, Mauritius, etc.

Apart from the 2000 formal meetings of the Council held since 1967, a number of informal meetings are organized in each six-month period by the incumbent Presidency in its own country. These meetings do not normally take the place of the Council's routine work, nor do they produce formal conclusions, but they allow Ministers to hold the frankest possible discussions or exchanges of views on general subjects in order to work out guidelines for future action in specific areas. However, some of these informal meetings, such as in particular the "Gymnicks" of the Ministers for Foreign Affairs or the ECOFIN meetings, often have considerable political importance because of their tendency to tackle particularly sensitive topics.

The earlier years of the Council, more than recent ones, were punctuated by the infamous "marathon sessions". This style of negotiation "to the finish", extending over several days and nights and involving long uninterrupted meetings in restricted session, was first used to negotiate the bases for the Common Agriculture Policy and subsequently for the annual setting of farm prices. Other Councils followed suit, for the annual budgets, for the adoption of the Common Fisheries Policy, on environmental subjects such as baby seals or motor vehicle emissions, or in transport concerning the weights and dimensions of heavy goods vehicles, liberalization of air transport, etc.

The General Affairs Council has also had to resort to this style of negotiation, chiefly in order to finalize various accession negotiations or successive Lomé Conventions. Of all these "marathons", none can compare with the celebrated session in 1961 which laid the foundations for the common agricultural policy: it started on 18 December 1961, adjourned briefly for Christmas, and finally came to a close on 11 January 1962. In order to keep to its deadline, the end of 1961, the Council invented the device of "stopping the clock", which has now entered into Community parlance.

Nowadays marathon sessions have become a much rarer phenomenon, although another fine specimen was furnished by the April 1996 meeting on the BSE crisis. Part of the reason why marathons have generally become less frequent is that since the late 1970s, there has been a gradual return to the practice of qualified majority voting where allowed for in the Treaty; following the Single Act, majority voting was extended to the internal market (Article 100a) and the Maastricht Treaty extended it to a number of other sectors.

However, there have been some innovations in recent years: first of all the "public debates" – twelve a year – launched in 1992 by the Edinburgh European Council in order to make Council proceedings more transparent. These meetings cover, amongst other things, the presentation of each new Presidency's

programme and topics of general interest, for example, presentation of the Commission's farm prices package. Another innovation is the "structured dialogue" established by the European Council in Essen in December 1994, as part of the strategy to prepare the countries of Central and Eastern Europe (the CCEEs) for accession: several times a year, the Council in its various formations meets Ministers from the countries hoping to join.

As a result of the decision on the establishment of the institutions reached by the European Council in Brussels in 1993, the Council has finally been able to set up its headquarters, rather than just its provisional place of work, in the capital of Belgium. Since 29 May 1995 it has been installed in the "Justus Lipsius" building, a vast complex on the Rond-point Schuman comprising a "conference" section equipped with meeting and reception rooms, offices for delegations, a press centre and canteens, and a "secretarial" section to house the approximately 2 500 officials of the General Secretariat. Shortly to become Council property, the Justus Lipsius building has replaced the Charlemagne building, which the Council occupied from 1971 to 1995; previously the Council was accommodated in the Ravenstein building in the centre of Brussels.

On the whole, the history of the Council provides a faithful reflection of the ups and downs that the Community, and now the Union, has gone through. There are some crises which will always remain engraved in our memories, such as the "empty chair policy" adopted by the French in 1965, or more recently, the United Kingdom's "policy of non-cooperation" over the BSE crisis in the spring of 1996. There have been other crises which have hit the headlines, but by and large the results are positive: common policies have been developed, and ambitious projects such as the internal market have become a reality, albeit still an imperfect one, and others, such as Monetary Union, are on the point of being realized.

At a time when the Council is due to hold its 2000th meeting – and soon its 2500th, counting from the beginning of the ECSC – there are a series of major challenges facing the Union – and the Council, as the Union's central decision-making body – which are usually described under the blanket term "Agenda 2000" ⁽¹⁾.

The first of these fundamental deadlines is the conclusion, if possible at the European Council in Amsterdam, of the Intergovernmental Conference, one of whose main objectives is to get the Union institutions "fit" to cope with the greatest of these challenges, viz., future enlargement to up to 25 members or more.

It is too early yet to say what the IGC will bring in this regard: the main problems being discussed in relation to the Council's decision-making machinery are the extension of qualified majority voting, reweighting of Member States' votes and the introduction of an enhanced cooperation procedure (or flexibility). But there can be no doubt that the answers to these questions – and to those concerning the other institutions – will in large measure determine the Union's chances of succeeding with its ambitious programme.

Our next rendez-vous then: publication of an appraisal of these matters in the special communiqué issued for the Council's 3000th meeting...

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Annex I: Statistics

Annexes II, III and IV: Lists of those present and agendas for the meetings on 25 January 1958, 3 July 1967 and 2 May 1985.

Annex I

Breakdown of the 2000 Council Meetings by subject matter

[Breakdown of the 2000 Council Meetings by subject matter \(1967-1996\)](#)

Annex II

First meeting of the Council's of the European Economic Community and of the European Atomic Energy Community

1. Date: 25 January 1958
(inaugural meeting)

2. Present

President:

Mr VAN LAROCK (B)

Federal Republic of Germany:

Mr von BRENTANO

Prof. L. ERHARD

Mr F. ETZEL

France:

Mr Ch. PINEAU

Mr P. PFLIMLIN

Mr M. FAURE

Italy:

Mr G. PELLA

Mr G. MEDICI

Luxembourg:

Mr J. BECH

Mr P. WERNER

Netherlands:

Mr J. LUNS

Mr H. HOFSTRA

Prof. Dr. ZIJLSTRA

Commission:

(a) ECSC:

Mr FINET

Mr SPIERENBURG

Mr COPPE

Mr DAUM

Mr WEHRER

Mr POTTHOFF

Mr REYNAUD

(b) EEC:

Mr HALLSTEIN

Mr MALVESTITI

Mr MANSHOLT

Mr MARJOLIN

Mr LEMARGNIN

Mr REY

Mr von der GROEBEN

Mr PETRILLI

(c) EURATOM:
Mr MEDI
Mr de GROOTE
Mr SASSEN

3. Agenda

1. Inaugural speeches
2. Problems relating both to the Common Market and to Euratom
3. Problems relating to the Common Market
4. Problems relating to Euratom
5. Calendar of subsequent meetings

Annex III

First meeting of the Council of the European Communities (Finance)

1. Date: 3 July 1967

2. Present

President: Mr Karl SCHILLER (D)

Belgium: Mr HENRION

France: Mr DEBRE

Italy: Mr COLOMBO

Luxembourg: Mr WERNER

Netherlands: Mr de BLOCK

Mr WITTEVEEN

Commission: Mr MARJOLIN

3. Agenda

(i) Short-term economic problems:

(a) Exchange of views on the short-term economic situation in the Community

(b) Guidelines to be followed in short-term economic policy during the second half of the 1967; first decision to take for 1968

(ii) Declaration by the Netherlands Minister of Finance on the definition of the unit of account in the Common Agricultural Policy

(iii) Progress report on work on fiscal matters

Annex IV

1000th meeting of the Council of the European Communities (Agriculture)

1. Date: 2-5 May 1985

2. Present

President: Mr Filippo Maria PANDOLFI (I)

Belgium: Mr Paul de KEERSMAEKER

Denmark: Mr Niels Anker KOFOED

Federal Republic of Germany: Mr Ignaz KIECHLE
Mr Walther FLORIAN
Greece: Mr Constantinos SIMITIS
France: Mr Henri NALLET
Ireland: Mr Austin DEASY
Luxembourg: Mr Marc FISCHBACH
Netherlands: Mr Gerrit BRAKS
United Kingdom: Mr Michael JOPLING
Mr John MacGREGOR

Commission: Mr Frans H.J.J. ANDRIESEN

3. Agenda

Commission proposals on agricultural prices and certain related measures (1985/1986)

(i) Products

(ii) Agri-monetary aspects

(iii) Financial implications

(¹) covering the following topics: EMU, enlargement, post-1999 financial framework, reforms of the CAP and of structural policies.