

Describe the main institutions of the European Union and evaluate their roles.

United Kingdom joined the European Community, now known as European Union (EU) on 1st January 1973. In 1986, The Single Economic Market was introduced by the Single European Act. In 1992, the Maastricht Treaty outlined the three areas or pillars that the Union will concentrate on: economic and social policies, Common Foreign and Security Policy, and Justice and Home Affairs. In 1997, the Treaty of Amsterdam concentrated on a few issues, for example social policy and citizenship. The Treaty of Nice of 2001 effectively added twelve new members to the Union. In 2003, the European Constitution was drafted. It was signed in the following year, only to be rejected in French and Dutch referenda, which prompted other nations to halt or postpone their ratification plans. It was supposed to be ratified by 2006, but this is now impossible. The institutions created under the European Union each play an important role and they shall be discussed below.

The European Commission is made up of twenty five members, subject to the approval of Parliament. Interestingly, they do not represent the country from which they come, although they must be nationals of one of the EU countries. These Commissioners represent the interest of the Union as a whole. The most important function of this Commission is that it is the only body that can initiate legislation. It does so for issues that falls under the first pillar, that is under the European Community category, while the power to initiate legislation on second and third pillars it shares with the member states. It can also legislate when the European Parliament or Council of EU formally orders it to do so. It ensures that EU law is upheld and is able to bring those that do not obey them to the European Court of Justice. It drafts the annual budget. It negotiates international trade agreements with countries outside the EU. It also decides on matters concerning the accession of new members to the EU.

The Council of EU is the most powerful organisation of EU. It forms a part of the legislative arm of the EU. Its membership is not permanent. Even the role of the president rotates among candidates from the member states every six months. The European Parliament can question the Council but the chief control is exercised by the respective governments. This Council should not be confused with the European Council which has the heads of states of EU countries as its members. The European Council holds a summit twice a year to discuss strategy and broad policies. Initially informal, this council has been made formal in Article 2 of Single European Act 1986.

The European Parliament has 732 members. Its membership is designed to reflect the size of the respective member state's population. United Kingdom has 78 seats. The Members of the European Parliament (MEPs) are directly elected in the country to which they belong. The Parliament forms the other part of the legislative arm where EU is concerned. In some respects, the Council and the Parliament are similar to the bicameral Parliamentary system that is practiced in many countries. The Parliament also appoints ombudsmen to oversee the administration of justice. The Parliament elects the President of the Commission and has veto power against the appointment of the Commissioners. A vote of censure from the Parliament can dismiss the Commission as a whole. The Council of EU addresses the Parliament yearly and that is followed by a debate. The Parliament reports on the Council of EU three times a year. The Council also presents the annual budget on which the Parliament has veto powers.

The European Court of Justice (ECJ) sits in Luxembourg. There are twenty five judges and eight Advocate Generals. They are chosen from those who are eligible for the highest judicial ranks in their own countries. The judges have six years renewable tenure. THE Advocate Generals usually does the research in a particular case, and then submits an opinion containing the issues raised and suggested conclusions to the judges. These opinions are merely persuasive and are not binding on the decisions of the judges. However, the judges usually end up following them. The court, exercising its judicial role, decides on cases of disputes that come before them. Its supervisory role allows them under Article 234 of Treaty of Rome to be referred to if there is a problem of interpretation of EU law. This is done by the national courts. The Commission may bring a state to the court if the state has not implemented a directive or other required legislations while a state can bring the Commission to court if it has exceeded its powers.

European Union has established institutions that are fairly efficient in carrying out what they have been made to do. However, these institutions are not free from criticism. The rotating presidency role of the Council of EU, taken seriously before, was not considered to be wise as other non-EU governments complained about constantly shifting priorities and personnel of the council. An election for MEPs should be held across Europe, so that member states are not confined to vote for their own Ministers only. This would create MEPs that are 'truly Europe' and free from local political games. In January 2006, the Chancellor of Austria, Schusler, have criticised the ECJ by saying that the court has systematically increase its jurisdiction into matters that do not concern them. His comment was further strengthened by the Danish Prime Minister, Rasmussen, who said that the ECJ has decided in a way that was not politically agreed on before.

The European Union has created institutions that serve their purposes and are fairly effective as a whole. However, as with anything else, there are areas for improvement, and EU should seriously look into this to function at its best.