

BRUSSELS SPECIAL

The EU (FarmersWeekly 8-1998)

5 **THE COMMISSION**

SOMETIMES described as “the heart” of the EU, the commission is the body which designs and proposes new legislation. Previously based in the famous Berlaymont building, the commission’s 15,000 staff are now scattered around Brussels, following problems with high asbestos levels in the former headquarters. The commission is

10 headed up by the 20 commissioners —appointed for a five-year term by the 15 member states — who meet every Wednesday. Key players, like the UK, France and Germany, have two commissioners each. Following the mass resignation of the entire commission last March, a new team is currently up for consideration. UK nominations are former Labour leader, Neil Kinnock, (up for a second term) and former governor of Hong Kong, Chris Patten. The European parliament will approve the final

15 line-up in mid-September, with the farm portfolio heading back to Austrian, Franz Fischler. The commission is divided into 26 different directorates-general, including DG6 (agriculture) and DG24 (consumer affairs) which do the day-to-day work.

As well as proposing new legislation, the commission is responsible for policing existing laws, to make sure all member states comply. It has the right to impose fines.

20 It also manages agricultural and regional policy. and controls EU expenditure. For example, the cereals management committee meets every Thursday to set export subsidies and adjudicate intervention tenders. The commission also has considerable powers to “fill in the gaps” of Council legislation.

25 The work of the commission is constantly scrutinised by the other institutions of the EU, in particular the European parliament.

THE PARLIAMENT

TRADITIONALLY seen as the weakest of the three main institutions, the parliament is now acquiring more influence in the running of the EU. The only directly elected
30 body, the parliament is made up of 626 MEPs, representing almost 100 different political parties. These are organised into eight broader groups, of which the Party of European Socialists and the European People's Party (mainly Christian democrats) are the main two. Recent elections in May saw a shift in political balance towards the right. The European parliament meets every month in its palatial new offices in
35 Strasbourg. But most of its work is carried out in palatial new offices in Brussels. Each month, literally thousands of staff decamp from Brussels to Strasbourg for the plenary session, in an operation that keeps many a haulier and hotelier in business. The secretariat is based in Luxembourg.

Historically, the parliament's powers were restricted to approving the EU's budget —
40 currently valued at E80bn (£ 57bn). It is able to amend commission proposals and, with the exception of the agricultural budget, decide the final amounts. It is also responsible for monitoring expenditure and can even force the entire commission's resignation in cases of maladministration and fraud.

In recent years the parliament has been given more powers over some areas of legislation, either through co-operation with Council (in which it can make amendments
45 in areas such as regional development and environmental policy) or through co-decision, (in which it can throw out legislation in areas such as consumer protection and health).

The 1997 Amsterdam Treaty has extended the range of issues covered by co-
50 decision from 15 to 38.

Farm policy, however, is still dealt with under the old consultation procedure, in which parliament is asked for its opinion on new legislation, but may be ignored by the commission and council. Parliament has the important job of appointing the president and members of the commission, and scrutinising their performance.

THE COUNCIL

THE council is the EU's principal decision-making body. It amends and adopts commission proposals which then become EU law. Based in the Justus Lipsius building in Brussels, council is made up of 15 ministers —one from each member state. A different council is convened for various subjects, including agriculture, economic/financial affairs and general affairs. These three meet monthly, while lesser councils, such as environment or education, meet only occasionally. The council presidency changes hands every six months, and is currently held by Finland. The agriculture council, currently headed by Finnish farm minister Kalevi Hemila, is serviced by the special committee on agriculture (SCA), which is made up of top civil servants from each member state. The SCA prepares detailed papers and draft legislation. Most legislation has to be passed by what is known as a “qualified majority” of ministers. Each member state is given a certain number of votes, according to population, as follows:

UK: 10, Germany: 10, France: 10, Italy: 10, Spain: 8, Greece: 5, Netherlands: 5, Belgium: 5, Portugal: 5, Sweden: 4, Austria: 4, Denmark: 3, Finland: 3, Ireland: 3, Luxembourg: 2.

A qualified majority is achieved when 62 out of 87 votes are cast the same way. Conversely, a “blocking minority” is achieved with 26 votes.

Thus, if the UK (10), Italy (10), Sweden (4) and Denmark (3) team up on any issue, they hold 27 votes and can block the legislation.

On issues of greater political sensitivity, a unanimous vote is required, while on other issues, a simple majority of eight ministers will suffice.

Usually, when the council passes a new law, the actual implementation is left to the
80 commission.

THE OTHERS

European Court of Justice:

Based in Luxembourg, the court's main job is to uphold the laws of the EU, and ensure the same interpretation by all member states. There are 15 judges and nine ad-
85 vocate generals, who may be called upon to decide on cases brought by national governments, the commission or other EU institutions. They may also be asked to give national courts guidance on points of community law.

European Court of First Instance:

Attached to the court of justice, the court of first instance deals with actions brought
90 by private individuals and companies against the EU institutions.

European Court of Auditors:

The taxpayers' watchdog, the court of auditors checks that the EU institutions, and in particular the commission, stick to the budgetary rules. It has the power to make spot checks, aiming to crack fraud.

95 The Economic and Social Committee:

There are some 222 members of the economic and social committee, drawn from a cross section of society. Their job is to issue opinions on various subjects, so as to give an independent input into the legislative process. The Committee of the Re-
gions: A consultative body, made up of local government representatives, dealing

100 with subjects such as regional policy and health.