Introduction

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 would 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 power resting in the hands of the Commission. Meanwhile, Commission President Romano Prodi argued for the opposite model (giving more power to the Commission and less to the Council), 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 Intergovernmental Conference met throughout much of 2000 to discuss the reform of EU 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 states, 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 Intergovernmental 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.
How does a General Election actually work?

The UK is a liberal democracy. This means that we democratically elect politicians, who represent our interests. It also involves that individual rights are protected.

The type of liberal democracy we have is a constitutional monarchy, where the powers of the monarch are limited by the terms and conditions put down in the constitution.

Parliamentary system

The UK has a parliamentary system of democratic governance. Unlike presidential and semi-presidential systems, there is an interconnection between the legislative (law-making) and executive (law-enforcing) branches of government in a parliamentary system. In the UK, this means that the executive (consisting of the Queen and the governments of England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland) is accountable to the legislature or Parliament (House of Commons, House of Lords and devolved Assemblies in Wales and Northern Ireland).

Appointed Prime Minister (or chancellor) as Head of Government and a monarch (or ceremonial president) as Head of State.

First-Past-the-Post

Members of Parliament in the House of Commons are elected using the first-past-the-post electoral system. Each of the 650 voting constituencies in the UK are represented by an MP. During the general and most local elections, the candidate with most of the votes becomes the local representative. Candidates campaign door-to-door, hold debates and publish manifestos (comparable to shopping list of what they are planning to do once they are in power). Eligible voters, about 46m in the UK, receive their polling card once they register online, or they can vote by post.

Party with most of the votes is invited by the Queen to form a government. If there is no clear winner, there is a hung Parliament. In this case, a minority or coalition government can be formed. A minority government does not have an overall majority in Parliament. A coalition government means that two or more political parties agree to share power in government. If that does not work out, new elections may be called.

Arguments about enlargement

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 the 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.

"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

"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

"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

Technical Terms

- **Supranational**: a form of organisation through which decisions are made by international institutions, not by individual states.
- **Intergovernmental**: a form of international organisation where governments work together to achieve shared goals.

Links