

Introduction

The European Economic and Social Committee (EESC) brings together business and trade union leaders, along with representatives of farmers, consumers and other groups that make up organised civil society to discuss economic and business policies. It is one of two consultative bodies of the European Union (the other is the Committee of the Regions). The European Commission and European Parliament have to consult the EESC before making decisions but they are under no obligation to take its advice.

History

The EESC was founded under the Treaty of Rome (1957) to present the views of civil society in the decision making process of the Commission, the Council of the European Union and the EU Parliament. The idea of having such a body reflects the dominance of the social market model of relations between government and civil society at the time of the European Community's founding.

The EESC was intended to be the main means of communication between interest groups and the EU institutions. However, the EESC has had mixed success in its main aim because many interest groups have gone outside the Committee to influence Commissioners and MEPs directly. This undermined the Committee and many expected it to be wound up as the European Community pursued deeper integration in the 1980s and 1990s. However, the Maastricht Treaty (1992) reinforced its role and it now focuses on promoting the objectives of the EU with community leaders. It is particularly active in current debate about the impact of globalisation, energy policy, the environment and climate change.

When the global economic crisis began in 2008, the EESC said the EU should respond by establishing closer economic governance between member states, and a tax on financial transactions.

How does the EESC work?

The EESC has a 344 member assembly made up of representatives nominated by member states' governments for terms of four years. The Committee meets eight or nine times a year and in six sub-committees dealing with particular areas of business and economic policy. It elects a President and two Vice-Presidents every two years. The current President is Staffan Nilsson, who was elected in October 2010. The members of the Committee are divided into three groups representing employers, workers and other interests. The groups vote in blocs and on many issues the employers' and workers' groups oppose each other, giving the third group the casting vote.

Facts and figures

- ❖ The EESC's budget for 2015 is over €1.3 billion, a 1.47% budgetary increase on 2014.
- ❖ In 2002, the European Parliament Budgetary Control Committee issued a motion calling for the EESC to be wound up. There were also renewed calls for the EESC to be abolished in 2010, following the global economic crash, to reduce EU expenditure. Over half of the EESC's annual budget is devoted to their members' expenses, travel costs and staff salaries and pensions.

Arguments

For

- ❖ The EU is not just an economic organisation – it has social responsibility – and the EESC has an important role in representing the views of the wider society.
- ❖ The EESC is a bridge between the EU and its citizens, promoting a more participatory, inclusive and democratic European society.
- ❖ It enables communication between similar interest groups in different countries – breaking down cultural barriers.

Against

- ❖ The EESC maintains old fashioned corporatist practices which damage economic performance.
- ❖ The EESC creates bureaucracy rather than tackling the concerns of special interest groups.
- ❖ The competing concerns of different interest groups and countries means that the Committee rarely reaches a consensus.

“The one distinctive thing about the European approach, both left and right, is the belief that the social dimension goes along with the economic. The American model might produce more jobs, but it couldn’t really care a damn about the social justice.”

John Prescott, British Deputy Prime Minister, 2001-2007

“A lot of people talk about communicating Europe and, on this, the Committee has a particularly active role to play.”

Hans Brunmayr, Director-General of Protocol, Council of the European Union

Technical Terms

- ❖ **Organised civil society:** a narrow definition that means only people representing official organisations, as well as some charities and pressure groups.
- ❖ **Social market model:** developed by Ludwig Erhard after World War II, it means a free market economy that shows concern for social issues through welfare and other supports.
- ❖ **Interest Group or Special Interest:** a group representing a particular section of business or society and attempting to promote policies that will benefit them.
- ❖ **Corporatism:** formal co-operation between business and trade unions.

Links

- ❖ <http://www.eesc.europa.eu/?i=portal.en.home>
- ❖ <http://eur-lex.europa.eu/budget/data/DB/2015/en/SEC06.pdf>