



**European  
community**

# BACKGROUND INFORMATION

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## THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT: THE VEDEL REPORT

(Second of two articles)

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Washington

"The higher the summit, the sooner the climbing party must set out."

On this metaphorical note, an ad hoc working party of fourteen independent experts took on a task assigned last year by the European (Common Market) Commission to study the enlargement of the European Parliament's powers.

The working party -- eminent jurists from the six member and four candidate Community states -- was headed by French constitutional authority Georges Vedel.

The recently published, 124-page Vedel Report dismissed the argument that the Parliament cannot be granted more than advisory powers until it is directly elected.

"If one cannot imagine a Parliament with real powers which does not draw its mandate from direct universal suffrage, it is even more difficult to imagine the election through direct universal suffrage of a Parliament without extended powers," the Report said. "In this way, two equally desirable objectives are making each other's implementation impossible. The only way to break the vicious circle is to refuse to let one of the two objectives depend on the prior achievement of the other."

### Parliamentary Ratification

The Vedel Report recommended that, by 1978, Council of Ministers decisions should need parliamentary ratification. This power of co-decision, the Report said, should come in two stages:

First, Parliament would have power of co-decision in revising the Community Treaties, admitting new members, and ratifying international agreements concluded by the Community. The Parliament would also have delaying powers -- forcing further Council deliberations -- in other matters.

In the second stage, the Parliament will have full decision-making power in the common agricultural, transport, and commercial policies, industrial competition, harmonization of laws and tax systems, and the European Social Fund.

The Report aimed at democracy and effectiveness. The growth of economic links -- including monetary union -- presupposes an increase in parliamentary authority. The Community's powers can be realistically extended only with the support of political and social forces throughout Europe, and "these forces can normally make themselves heard [best] in the European Parliament," the Report declared.

### Community Decisions

The Vedel Report also pointed out that, as the Community's powers are extended, the national parliaments of the member states inevitably lose some powers. More and different European interest groups are affected by the Community's decisions: hence a need for greater parliamentary surveillance.

Under the present system of Council decision-making, the Vedel Report said, "there would be a danger of seeing sectional conflicts transformed into conflicts between national interests." Instead, the Report said, the European Parliament is "the institution par excellence" in which conflicting interests could be reconciled and a democratic consensus ensured.

The presently weak European Parliament leads to an "institutional imbalance"

within the Community, the Report said. "The defense of national short-term interests prevails over long-term forecasts...as if conservatism were triumphing over imagination." A strengthened Parliament would lead to more efficient decision-making.

#### Direct Elections

The Vedel Report came out strongly for direct universal suffrage "without loss of time." First steps should be taken, the Report said, when members from the four new Community states take their seats in Strasbourg next January.

The ultimate goal should be a single electoral system in all the member states. Separate polls "cannot have the same stimulating effect for European integration as simultaneous elections in all member states." It would help toward the creation of European parties and "mobilize public opinion at a European level."

As a first step, however, national initiatives "should not be ignored." The Report cited unofficial British proposals that thirty members of the European Parliament be directly elected at the same time as the general elections for the House of Commons.

The Report recommended that total membership of the European Parliament be increased in order to guarantee more proportional representation.

#### Need for Linkage

The Vedel Report foresees that, as a result of direct suffrage, new problems will be created -- in particular, there will no longer be a "community of personnel" between the EC Parliament and the national legislatures. Consequently, inter-parliamentary relations may degenerate into rivalry. The present system of a European Parliament member's dual mandate has therefore some advantages. It "creates a sort of personal union." But the increased work load of the European Parliament -- last year the average member attended forty-five days of plenary sessions plus twenty-five committee meetings -- makes it increasingly difficult for a member to be effective both at Strasbourg and in his own capital.

The Report proposed that institutional links be established between the EC Parliament and the national legislatures.

### Report Sparks Discussion

The prospective enlargement of the Community and plans for monetary union have enhanced the significance of the Report which will be discussed at the European "summit" this fall in Paris -- if this is not postponed by France because of other member states' reluctance to have a Community "political secretariat" established in Paris.

The British press, in particular, has focused on the Report.

Said The Financial Times of London: "There is only one fundamental question of principle which has to be settled by the Summit: will the ten Governments of the enlarged Community agree to strengthen the European Parliament, or will they discover some convenient pretext for postponing the issue until some more propitious moment?"

The paper proposed that Britain postpone ratification of its accession to the Community until the options open to the "Summit" are cleared.

The liberal Guardian said that, unless the European Parliament's powers were increased simultaneously with the Community's enlargement, the EC "will be in danger of atrophy."

A "pragmatic" interim method for strengthening the European Parliament, The Economist suggested, would consist of its meeting in each of the ten parliaments of the enlarged Community instead of in isolated Strasbourg. Taking the Parliament to the peoples, the British periodical said, would strike the public imagination, increase the Community's popularity, and put the EC Parliament in touch with the democratic traditions of member states.

Summing it up, the European Movement -- a continent-wide pressure group -- said that the goal of the Community should be "the creation of a government of the United States of Europe controlled by a parliament elected by universal suffrage" -- the implicit goal of the Community all along.