

The European Council

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The European Council, a unique decision-making body, was not mentioned in the basic treaties of the European Community and developed from practice. By the end of the 1960s, it had already become clear that the summit conferences, attended at more or less regular intervals by the Heads of State or Government, were the best means for overcoming the institutional and decision-making deadlocks resulting especially from the failure of the Fouchet Plans for political union. But the international situation that prevailed in the early 1970s made it all the more urgent to revive the debate on Europe's institutions. The Nine were obliged to develop their political cooperation in the wake of the accession to the EEC of three new Member States, Denmark, Ireland and the United Kingdom, the first oil crisis and the end of the Bretton Woods International Monetary System. Valéry Giscard d'Estaing, the newly elected President of the French Republic, used the French Presidency of the Community to invite his counterparts to attend a summit meeting on 9–10 December 1974. In this way, he took positive action on the various initiatives for concerted action by the European governments and joint decision-making put forward by Jean Monnet in the Action Committee for a United States of Europe (ACUSE) since the 1969 Hague Summit. In the final communiqué from the Paris Conference, the Heads of State or Government of the Nine confirmed that they would meet, along with their Foreign Ministers, three times a year and whenever the need arose. The European Council was to be a diplomatic and intergovernmental arrangement but not one of the institutions. It was a formal endorsement of the personal involvement of the Heads of State or Government in European integration since it gave formal recognition of their role in instigating, coordinating and determining the main policy options in European integration and in political cooperation between the Member States.

The European Council was welcomed by the 1976 Tindemans Report on the European Union, the 1979 report of the Three Wise Men on reform of the institutions, the 1981 European Act and later by the Spinelli Draft Treaty establishing the European Union, although they all proposed changes in practice. The European Council was given a formal legal basis in February 1986 in the Single European Act (SEA), where it is defined as the body that lays down guidelines of a general nature and concerning European political cooperation. In practice, the European Council would have a growing role in favour of greater integration.