

The Report of the Three Wise Men

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The Report of the Three Wise Men

On 5 December 1978, the Brussels European Council decided, on a proposal from the French President, Valéry Giscard d'Estaing, to ask a committee of three eminent politicians to draw up a series of specific proposals likely to improve the mechanisms and procedures of the Community institutions, particularly with a view to the Community's future enlargement when it would have twelve Member States.

The 'Three Wise Men' were Barend Biesheuvel, former Prime Minister of the Netherlands and sometime Member of the European Parliament, Edmund Dell, former British Minister for Trade, and Robert Marjolin, former Vice-President of the European Commission. The Committee met for the first time on 18 December 1978 in Brussels. For several months, it held talks with the political authorities of all the Member States of the Community and the senior officials in all the Community institutions. It also consulted the committee chaired by Dirk Spierenburg which had, in September 1978, been asked by the European Commission to produce a report on its internal restructuring.

The 'Report on the European Institutions' was published in condensed format in October 1979 and submitted to the Dublin European Council held on 29 and 30 November 1979. Aware of the challenges of further Community enlargement, the Three Wise Men suggested a series of specific improvements to the way in which each of the Community institutions worked. In particular, the report welcomed the establishment, in 1975, of the European Council and called on it to set itself priorities and work more closely with the other institutions. The report called for majority voting to be made standard practice and specified the responsibilities that the Presidency of the Council of Ministers should assume in terms of achieving the priority aims of its programme. It also emphasised the need to strengthen the European Commission's right to propose legislation and capacity for action. Accordingly, it proposed that there should be no more than one Commissioner per country and that the President of the Commission should enjoy enhanced powers and authority. In keeping with the conclusions of the Spierenburg Report, the Three Wise Men called for a reduction in the number of directorates-general (DGs) within the Commission. They also advocated stepping up cooperation between the Commission and the European Parliament, which had recently been elected by direct universal suffrage. The role of the Economic and Social Committee was also acknowledged, with a call being made for improved dialogue with all the social partners. Finally, the Three Wise Men called for the jointly adopted policies to be applied in a non-uniform manner which took into account the situation of the prospective new Member States.

The Report of the Three Wise Men was considered on 1 and 2 December 1980 by the Luxembourg European Council on the basis of a preparatory study drawn up by the Foreign Ministers of the Nine. Despite the moderate and pragmatic nature of the proposals, the conclusions of the Three Wise Men largely remained a dead letter.