

Letter from Valéry Giscard d'Estaing to the Heads of Government of the nine Member States (21 January 1977)

Caption: Letter of 21 January 1977 from Valéry Giscard d'Estaing, President of the French Republic, to the Heads of Government of the nine Member States of the European Communities in which he puts forward proposals with a view to improving the operation of the European Council.

Source: Fonctionnement du "Conseil européen". Lettre du 21 janvier 1977 de M. Valéry Giscard d'Estaing, Président de la République française, et réponse du 24 janvier 1977 du Président Roy Jenkins, SEC(77) 414. Bruxelles: Commission des Communautés européennes, 01.02.1977. p. 1-4. Archives centrales du Conseil de l'Union européenne, B-1048 Bruxelles/Brussel, rue de la Loi/Wetstraat, 175.

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Letter dated 21 January 1977 from Valéry Giscard d'Estaing, President of the French Republic, to the Heads of Government of the nine Member States of the European Communities

At the end of the most recent meeting of the European Council in The Hague, I said that I intended to put to you and our colleagues some proposals aimed at improving the way in which the Council works. After two years and six meetings, it is time to draw certain conclusions from the experience that we have acquired.

Firstly, we should note that we are on the right track. At times, we solved problems crucial to our common future — accession of the United Kingdom, election of the European Parliament by universal suffrage — which we know could not have been settled in any other way. At times, we exchanged views in an atmosphere of candour and intimacy which would not have been possible in any other framework. I have the feeling that it is the European Council and the very fact that it is attended by the Heads of State or Government that made possible this progress towards the uniting of Europe which is our objective.

That does not mean that this mechanism needs no improvement. I see two reasons for such an improvement:

On the one hand, we have all had occasion to reflect that if, at times, we failed to reach precise conclusions, it was, in some cases, because of insufficient preparation.

On the other hand, the interest which our meetings inevitably arouse in the media leads them to seek out and comment on the substance of our decisions, even when the real value of some of our discussions consists more in keeping each other informed and in exchanging ideas than in reaching conclusions.

I therefore put to you the following suggestions concerning the three types of subject which we might consider together: those concerned with the provision of information, those enabling certain important or official decisions to be taken and those intended to enable a question to be dealt with in accordance with the Community procedures.



1. — It is essential that those who head our countries' governments should be able to exchange their views on certain problems of European or international interest in order to understand their difficulties better and to sound out our respective reactions. The aim, then, is not take decisions but to clarify the situation and the political perspectives in which the decisions will have to be taken. This type of discussion is fundamental to the activity of the European Council. In order to safeguard it, it is important that discussions should be held in an atmosphere of complete freedom and privacy, which presupposes that they should take place at a special sitting freed from any unnecessary administrative apparatus, and that it should be clearly indicated in advance that they will not result in the adoption of any written conclusions — whether drafted on the spot or not.

2. — The second task of the Council relates to the interest that the nine Member States may have in certain circumstances in giving a more official tone or a particular resonance to their decisions on matters of current relevance. The European Council has to make the voice of Europe heard, whether it be on the international stage — we did that in The Hague with regard to our relations with Japan — or vis-à-vis the general public at home, by adopting statements the terms of which need to be carefully weighed up and in respect of which it is important to avoid improvised drafting and to refrain from unnecessarily detailed discussion among ourselves.

3. — The third task of the European Council concerns problems which have been considered by the Community authorities but are deemed to justify submission to the Council, either because they raise a question of principle or because it was not possible to resolve them at a lower level.

It is then the role of the European Council to settle the matter, in other words, depending on the case in question, to take a decision or to lay down for Ministers policy guidelines which will enable them to reach a conclusion.

There are already precedents for these matters. It is, nevertheless, necessary for the Foreign Affairs Ministers to take appropriate preparatory action so as to limit the number of subjects to be considered and to draw up draft texts which are as detailed as possible.

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For that reason, the list of questions on which a decision must be taken or a statement made should be adopted by the Foreign Affairs Ministers at a meeting, which they would hold two or three weeks before our own proceedings on the initiative of the Minister whose country holds the Presidency. They would endeavour to finalise drafts for decisions or statements, leaving it to the Council, where appropriate, to settle certain basic, clearly defined matters of policy. It would be understood that, save in cases of exceptional urgency, no draft decision or statement could be submitted to the Council unless it had been subjected to this prior preparation process.

If the nature of our deliberations were clearly distinguished in this way, and if appropriate preparations could be made by the Foreign Affairs Ministers, at the instigation of the Minister whose country held the Presidency, I am convinced that we would place the European Council in a better position to take on the role of leadership which we wish to see it play in the interests of European integration.

It is in this spirit that I felt it worthwhile to put before you these few tangible suggestions, to which I would be happy to receive your reactions.