

'Rebalancing power between the Member States' from Libération (15 February 2000)

Caption: In a speech given on 14 March 2000, Michel Barnier, Member of the European Commission, outlines the reasons for the additional contribution of the Commission to its opinion of 26 January 2000 on the extension of qualified-majority voting. In particular, Mr Barnier clarifies the criteria governing the move to qualified-majority voting in sensitive areas such as tax and social security and clears up the confusion between a 'transfer of powers' and a 'change in the decision-making process'.

Source: Libération. 15.02.2000. Paris. "Entre les États, un pouvoir à rééquilibrer", auteur:Quatremer, Jean , p. 9.

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Rebalancing power between the Member States

The institutions have hardly changed since the Europe of Six.

Brussels (EU) from our correspondent

At the Intergovernmental Conference (IGC) which began yesterday, the Fifteen will be wrangling over three closely linked subjects affecting the balance of power between the Member States and, hence, the very operation of the European Union itself.

Weighting of votes

Unlike the situation at the European Central Bank, where each Governor has one vote regardless of whether he comes from Luxembourg, Germany or wherever, all the Member States do not have equal weight in the European Council of Ministers. Such a rule would not be very democratic, given that the Council is the EU's legislative body, since it would mean that German, French, British and Italian citizens, who account for three quarters of the EU population, could have legislation forced on them by a minority ... So, in order to take account of each country's demographic weight, the Treaty gives them different numbers of votes (see below). However, to avoid creating too big an imbalance, the weighting is only partial. The problem is that, over the years and with the various enlargements that have taken place, the system has become crazy, with one Luxembourg vote now representing 200 000 people, while one German vote represents 8 million.

Above all, decisions are not adopted by a simple majority, but by a 'qualified' majority requiring 62 votes out of 87, or around 71 % of the voting rights. The population needed to reach the qualified majority has dropped from 67 % (Europe of Six) to 58 % (Europe of Fifteen). Conversely, a decision can be blocked (blocking minority: 26 votes) by a group of small states accounting for 12 % of the total population. If nothing is done, with enlargement the qualified majority could represent less than 47 % of the total population. So much for democracy!

The bigger Member States want the whole system to be rebalanced so as to give them more weight. The reforms are particularly urgent because, apart from Poland, which is the same size as Spain, all the countries about to accede are small. The Commission has proposed a novel system: a decision would be adopted only if it was supported by a simple majority of states representing a majority of the population.

Extension of qualified majority voting

To a large extent, the Ministers of the Fifteen already use qualified majority voting in fields where the EU has responsibility, but unanimity still applies, particularly in sensitive areas (such as tax harmonisation). With enlargement, therefore, there will be a greater risk that a single country could block a decision that all the others wanted, so majority voting needs to be extended as much as possible. This issue is linked to the previous one: the bigger countries will not give up the right of veto that unanimity guarantees them unless their relative weight increases.

Size of the Commission

The five big countries (France, Germany, Italy, Spain, UK) are entitled to two Commissioners and all the others to one, giving a total of 20. With 27 countries, the Commission could have 33 members ... That is far too many for the portfolios available. The number would therefore have to be reduced, but the small countries will not give up their Commissioner.

There are other painful subjects in store for the Fifteen: redistributing the number of seats in the European Parliament among the Member States, the introduction of enhanced cooperation so that the more Eurosceptic countries can no longer block further integration, etc.

Jean Quatremer

