

The Consultative Assembly

The Consultative Assembly, now known as Parliamentary Assembly, was created as one of the two statutory organs of the Council of Europe and to serve as its deliberative body. On 10 August 1949, the Consultative Assembly, provisionally chaired by Édouard Herriot, met for the first time in the auditorium of the University of Strasbourg. The following day, the Belgian Socialist delegate and former Foreign Minister, Paul-Henri Spaak, was elected President of the Assembly.

The Assembly discusses any matter relating to the aim of the Council of Europe and falling within its remit, as well as any matters referred to it by the Committee of Ministers. The conclusions that it forwards to the Committee take the form of recommendations in the first instance and of opinions in the second. Its recommendations and opinions are on no account binding.

In addition to its consultative powers, the Assembly also has a number of powers to elect the bodies of the Council of Europe; this strengthens its parliamentary role within the organisation. It elects the Council of Europe's Secretary General, the Deputy Secretary General, the Clerk of the Assembly, the Judges at the European Court of Human Rights and the Commissioner for Human Rights.

The first version of Article 25 of the Statute, according to which the Consultative Assembly consists of representatives appointed by each member in accordance with the procedure adopted by each government, was amended in May 1951. Since then, each member state's representative in the Assembly is either elected by that member's national parliament or appointed from among its members of parliament.

Each member state has between 2 and 18 representatives in the Assembly, depending on the size of its population. Each representative, if absent, may have a substitute who may sit, speak and vote on his or her behalf.

The total number of representatives in 1949 was 87.

The Assembly may be convened by the Committee of Ministers for an extraordinary session. The Assembly adopts its internal Rules of Procedure. It elects its President from among its members. In accordance with the Statute, the President remains in office until the following ordinary session. In practice, the President serves for three sessions.

According to the Assembly's internal Rules of Procedure, the representatives and substitutes appointed by the national parliaments of each member state together form national delegations. They may also form political groups, which must consist of at least 20 members and include representatives and substitutes from at least six national delegations. Members of the Assembly, however, sit in the Chamber not according to membership of a national delegation or a political group but in alphabetical order.

On 10 and 11 December 1951, the proposal to turn the Consultative Assembly into a constituent assembly failed and led to the resignation of its Belgian President, Paul-Henri Spaak. Since 1949, there has been fierce disagreement between supporters of a strong federal Europe with a powerful Assembly and governments anxious to preserve their national sovereignty.