Appendix B: A short description of the European Parliament


"The members of the European Parliament (MEPs) sit not in national blocks but in Europe-wide political groups that bring together all the main political parties operating in the EU member states. Parliamentary elections are held every five years, and every EU citizen who is registered as a voter is entitled to vote. So Parliament expresses the democratic will of the Union's 374 million citizens, and it represents their interests in discussions with the other EU institutions.

The Parliament has three main roles:

It shares with the Council the *power to legislate*. The most common procedure for adopting (i.e. passing) EU legislation is "co-decision" (see the section on Decision-making in the European Union). This places the European Parliament and the Council on an equal footing and the laws passed using this procedure are joint acts of the Council and Parliament. It applies to legislation in a wide range of fields. On a range of other proposals Parliament must be consulted, and its approval is required for certain important political or institutional decisions. Parliament also provides impetus for new legislation by examining the Commission's annual work programme, considering what new laws would be appropriate and asking the Commission to put forward proposals.

It exercises *democratic supervision* over all EU institutions, and in particular the Commission. Parliament exercises democratic supervision over the other European institutions. It does so in several ways. First, when a new Commission is to be appointed, Parliament interviews all the prospective new members and President of the Commission (nominated by the member states). They cannot be appointed without Parliament's approval. Second, the Commission is politically answerable to Parliament, which can pass a "motion of censure" calling for its mass resignation. More generally, Parliament exercises control by regularly examining reports sent to it by the Commission (general report, reports on the implementation of the budget, the application of Community law, etc.). Moreover, MEPs regularly ask the Commission written and oral questions. The members of the Commission attend plenary sessions of Parliament and meetings of the parliamentary committees, maintaining a continual dialogue between the two institutions. Parliament also monitors the work of the Council: MEPs regularly ask the Council written and oral questions, and the President of the Council attends the plenary sessions and takes part in important debates. Parliament works closely with the Council in certain areas, such as common foreign and security policy and judicial co-operation, as well as on some issues of common interest such as asylum and immigration policy and measures to combat drug abuse, fraud and international crime. The Council Presidency keeps Parliament informed on all these subjects. Parliament can also exercise democratic control by examining petitions from citi-
zens and setting up temporary committees of inquiry. Finally, Parliament provides input to every EU summit (the European Council meetings). At the opening of each summit, the President of Parliament is invited to express Parliament's views and concerns about topical issues and the items on the European Council's agenda. It shares with the Council authority over the EU budget and can therefore influence EU spending. Parliament debates it in two successive readings, and it does not come into force until it has been signed by the President of Parliament. Parliament's Committee on Budgetary Control (COCOBU) monitors how the budget is spent, and each year Parliament decides whether to approve the Commission's handling of the budget for the previous financial year. This approval process is technically known as "granting a discharge".

Parliament's work is divided into two main stages:

*Preparing for the plenary session:* This is done by the MEPs in the various parliamentary committees that specialise in particular areas of EU activity. The issues for debate are also discussed by the political groups.

*The plenary session itself:* Plenary sessions, attended by all MEPs, are normally held in Strasbourg (one week per month) and sometimes in Brussels (two days). At these sessions, Parliament examines proposed legislation and votes on amendments before coming to a decision on the text as a whole."