Decision-making process within the Council in an enlarged Europe

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MEPs call for sweeping reforms to the Council's role and structures in the run-up to enlargement and for a basic set of citizens' rights to be enshrined in the Treaty, in the report adopted by large majorities in the Committee. Jean-Louis BOURLANGES (EPP, F) calls in his report for a thorough overhaul of the role, structures and operating procedures of the Council, the central EU decision-making body, in order to prevent paralysis as the EU prepares to take in new members. He believes the Council is being undermined by the growing confusion between its various bodies, namely the European Council, Council of Ministers, Presidency, Coreper and the specialist committees, and he warned during the debate on his report of the Council's "pernicious" tendency to bypass the proper Treaty procedures with informal networks and meetings and specialist committees, such as the Monetary Committee, the Political Committee and the K.4 Committee (which deals with justice and home affairs). He wants to see the Political Committee and the K.4 Committee disbanded and the role of preparing the Council's work restored to Coreper. The General Affairs Council should be revamped with enhanced powers and given a clear mandate to coordinate the Council's work. The European Council must focus on its role of providing political impetus and setting general policy guidelines, he says. To avoid the risk of drift, it must be rationalised and its meetings should generally be restricted to Heads of State or Government and the Commission President. The Committee predicts in the BOURLANGES report that the Presidency will have to concentrate increasingly on its conciliation tasks, hammering out legislation with Parliament and the Commission, and so will need to hand over the leadership of the Union and the conduct of foreign policy to the President of the Commission and the High Representative for the Common Foreign and Security Policy. Both these posts should have a political profile, with the CFSP High Representative being a member of the College of Commissioners, and not the Council, as proposed in the Amsterdam Treaty. On the issue of decision-making procedures in Council, Mr BOURLANGES calls for qualified-majority voting (QMV) to be established as a general principle as "unanimity is fundamentally inappropriate to effective decision-making". He also proposes that QMV should be used to set the limit on own resources, provided the Member States constituting the majority account for 70% of the contributions to the Community budget. The committee would be in favour of exceptions to the QMV principle for decisions on matters such as Treaty revision, enlargement, extending the Council's powers and electoral issues and would also provide a guarantee that no Member State could be obliged to deploy armed forces. On the thorny question of the weighting of votes in Council, Mr BOURLANGES proposes preserving the current balance under a system which would allocate additional points to Member States if the current ratio fell after enlargement.