Parliamentary reform put into practice

A working party on Parliamentary reform was set up by the Conference of Presidents in February 2007. The group is chaired by Dagmar Roth-Behrendt (PES, DE). Its mandate is to consider changes to all aspects of Parliament's procedures in plenary, committees and delegations which would improve Parliament's efficiency and effectiveness – as well as making proceedings more lively and easier to follow for press and public alike.

The working party presented its first interim report in September 2007, with a series of recommendations focusing on the plenary session. In October 2007, the Conference of Presidents adopted a number of decisions based on these recommendations. Most of these changes came into force at the January 2008 plenary session. Others will follow soon.

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Background

Changes visible at the January session

The January plenary has seen a number of new practices:

- in legislative debates, Parliament's rapporteurs have more speaking time and will have the last word in debate, with four minutes to speak at the start of the debate and two minutes at the end;
- each debate now includes a five-minute “catch-the-eye” session to enable MEPs not on the pre-arranged speaking list to take part in the discussion;
- the plenary agenda is now organised in clear sections: major legislative items are grouped on Tuesday, the week's priority debate on Wednesday morning and Wednesday afternoon devoted to items of topical political interest;
- the Conference of Presidents can choose to include short speeches from group leaders on key items just before they are put to the vote;
- when the Chamber is not full, the President is able to invite Members to participate in the debate from the front rows of the chamber rather than from their assigned places.
Background

Behind-the-scenes innovations

Several other changes now in force in preparing Parliament's work have also been implemented:

- deadlines for tabling texts and requests for separate, split and roll-call votes have been brought forward, to allow more time for groups and MEPs to consider their positions before the vote;
- there are new procedures within the Parliament's secretariat to develop a rolling programme to plan priority items coming to the plenary;
- the Conference of Presidents itself has updated and improved its pattern of meetings and its procedures for adopting draft agendas;
- some of the reports currently put to the vote without a debate (usually those adopted unanimously in committee) could be given a plenary presentation in a short debate including a statement from the rapporteur and a reaction from the Commission, where the Conference of Presidents so decides on a case-by-case basis.
Further changes in the pipeline

A few improvements have been agreed in principle but need further work on the details:

- a “cooling-off” period of at least a month between the vote on an item in committee and the plenary debate. This should allow more time for MEPs to consider their final positions at first reading and also to give more time to ensure the technical quality of legislative texts;
- improvements to the structure and procedures for the Question Time sessions and for Written Questions;
Background

Committees, delegations, inter-institutional relations and future Parliamentary structure

The Working Party is currently completing its second round of deliberations and will soon be presenting its ideas for improving the working procedures of committees and for inter-institutional relations. It will then tackle issues relating to external relations and proposals for the structure of Parliament after the elections of June 2009.
Press conference - audio files

EP President Hans-Gert Pöttering joined Ms Roth-Behrendt for a press conference on these changes on Wednesday 16 January 2008. You can listen to the audio recording of the press conference via the links below.