

BIG EU STATES CRITICISED FOR SECRET MEETINGS

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Large EU member states have come under fire for holding regular meetings on immigration issues with little or no public information about the agenda or outcome of the discussions.

The British House of Lords' EU committee has published a scathing report slamming the lack of transparency at the meetings that have been taking place since 2003 and are attended by justice ministers from the UK, France, Italy, Germany, Spain and Poland, EUobserver reports.

The committee says that important decisions are reached at the meetings - the last one was held in March in Germany - but that the public is not aware of what is going on.

According to the BBC, the report, entitled *Behind Closed Doors*, says it would expect the meetings to "attract wide interest from the media" but "this was not the case."

"They discussed almost every aspect of EU policy of interest to them, and in many cases reached firm conclusions on the action which should be taken and the timetable for it.

"However, in the United Kingdom, the meetings went almost entirely unnoticed," the report says.

Lord Wright of Richmond, chairman of the committee said: "We are not talking about occasional ministerial meetings. These are regular meetings of the six most powerful member states, at which ministers decide how they want to take forward EU policy on security, justice and home affairs."

"Parliament and the public, and other EU member states, have a right to be told in detail what has been decided," he said according to the Press Association.

The Lords committee said it was inevitable and desirable for small groups of countries to meet now that the EU is so big but noted that "their influence on EU policy is decisive."

"They should not try to ride rough-shod over the 19 smaller member states," their report says, with the next meeting due in October.

The meetings started after justice ministers expressed frustration at the slow pace of EU cooperation particularly in areas of illegal immigration.

At the time, French interior minister Nicolas Sarkozy said the states wanted to go "faster and further" on immigration issues.

This is not the first time transparency has come up at the EU level.

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The bloc has recently taken steps to try and make council meetings - where EU laws are made - more open after strong criticism that the public is entitled to see the legislative process. However, some suspect it will simply mean that real decisions will be taken far away from the camera.