Preface

In 1973 the United Kingdom (UK) acceded to the European Communities (EC), now known as the European Union (EU). Over the subsequent thirty-five years of membership the European issue has remained the subject of controversy within the party-political arena and amongst public opinion. Nevertheless, UK central government – officials and ministers alike – have had to contend with the demands of membership. How have they adapted to engagement with this increasingly important tier of governance? Has their adaptation been as controversial as that of the political parties? Our study explores the Europeanisation of British central government with a view to answering these questions. We argue that the impact of the EU on the work in, and working practices of, Whitehall has been considerable. We offer an analytical framework for understanding the adaptation of UK central government and of national institutions more generally and comparatively.

The main body of our analysis is centred on the situation prevailing under the Major and Blair governments. This was the period during which our research was undertaken and we have been able to obtain a detailed picture of the evolution of the impact on Whitehall of EU membership from the implementation of the Maastricht Treaty in 1993 through to the resignation of Tony Blair in May 2007. However, we have complemented this research with some archival and interview-based work so that we are able to present the first comprehensive view of central government's adaptation over the period since the first application, made in 1961.

Just as Britain's relationship with the EU has been highly controversial, so academics have not been exempt from expressing value judgements about the desirability of integration. No work can be completely value-free, of course, but we embrace explicitly one normative presumption in this study. It is that, having joined the integration process, British positions will be most effectively represented by ministers and officials if they learn to adapt their political behaviour and strategies to the multi-tiered system of governance that is the EU.

Methodology

In carrying out the analysis we undertook extensive elite interviewing over the period from 1996 to 2006. Our interviewees covered all central government departments including the Scottish, Welsh and Northern Ireland Offices, as well as the United Kingdom's Permanent Representation to the EU in Brussels (UKREP). In later projects we conducted further interviews in the devolved executives, the 'hub' and inner core departments of Whitehall. As part of the original project we also interviewed in both Houses of Parliament and in the European Union institutions in order to gain rather different, more distanced and critical appreciations of how UK civil servants and ministers have performed on the European stage. Our analysis also included interviews with retired ministers and officials who had been practitioners at the time of failed attempts at accession as well as, more importantly, the successful accession of 1973. This historical dimension was complemented by analysis undertaken in the Public Record Office and informs Chapter 4 of our study. Some of our interviewees, including for the contemporary component of research, helpfully provided us with documentation to augment the material that is on the record. All our interviews were conducted on an unattributable basis, and this is reflected in our referencing of them. Our project was funded by the UK's Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) under its Whitehall Programme award no. L 124251001.

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We gave seminar or conference presentations in a range of venues and benefited from the feedback offered, which we acknowledge with thanks. Seminars were given at the universities of Bradford, Edinburgh, Essex, Loughborough, Manchester, Nottingham, Sussex, Salford, Konstanz, at the Scottish Office and to two 'Westminster Explained' conferences of practitioners. We also presented our findings at a Whitehall Programme seminar to EU policy-makers from central government, hosted by the Chartered Institute of Public Finance and Accountancy (CIPFA), and would like to thank the Cabinet Office for publicising this event within its European network. Conference presentations were given within the Whitehall Programme at Birmingham, at the American Society for Public Administration (in Philadelphia), the University Association for Contemporary European Studies (UACES) (Budapest), the European Union Studies Association (Austin, Texas), a CONNEX (Connecting Excellence on European Governance) Framework 6 workshop in Oslo, an Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC)/Joint University Council of the Applied Social Sciences research training conference in York, a UACES/Jean Monnet conference on constitutionalism at Queen's University Belfast, and to a workshop of the ESRC/UACES Seminar Group on the Europeanisation of British Politics as well as its concluding conference at Sheffield Town Hall. We are, of course, responsible for any errors or omissions.

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