

40 years since the First Enlargement

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UACES Conferences, Forty Years since the First Enlargement

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Whitehall & Britain's Accession to the EEC after 1973: Cultural Revolution or Business as Usual?

Within the tremendous *corpus* of literature published on Britain and Europe, studies of the consequences of entry for Whitehall can unsurprisingly be traced back to very moment of Britain's accession to the Community. As Britain had been a candidate to entry for about ten years, little wonder that distinguished observers and scholars had sharpened their eye, then being able to observe and report changes – or their absence – that would take place *in vivo* in the machinery of the government. Helen and Henri Wallace were among the first to scrutinize and/or forecast the transformations of what was not yet dubbed as the *core executive* of the British administrative machine, and one cannot but be struck, 40 years on, by their accuracy in tackling the main issues at stake since the first hours of Britain's membership to the European club, and even before¹. They launched a rich and long-lasting tradition of research which, via Hussein Kassim (Kassim, 2000) *inter alii*, up to the latest book by Simon Bulmer and Martin Burch (Bulmer & Burch, 2009), produced the finest works on the transforming/adjustment of the British central government to the European context.

The purpose of this paper is to start from those references - and works by Helen Wallace dating back to that time could even be considered as historical sources-

¹ See Helen Wallace, « The Impact of the European Communities on National Policy-Making », *Government and Opposition*, 6: 4, October 1971, p. 520–538; *National Governments and the European Communities*, Chatham House -PEP European Series, 1973; “The Impact of Community membership on the British Machinery of Government” *Journal of Common Market Studies*, XI: 4, p. 243-262.



and to go further on the empirical side. If the main trends of change have been identified by scholars in the past 40 years, examples and case-studies of policy measures will be examined, bringing in the picture new testimonies and more recent or unexplored sources about the first decade of British membership to the EEC.

I. Achieving the decade of candidacy: completing and polishing the coordinating machine

As Bulmer and Burch clearly demonstrated (Bulmer & Burch, 2009: 80-81), the main structures and practices of Whitehall's "core executive" (Rhodes & Dunleavy, 1995) remained relatively unaffected by Britain's entry to the EEC in the first place, except for the Cabinet Office. While lessons were being drawn from the 1961-1963 and the 1967 applications², the main changes incrementally occurred during the 1960s: a shift of the coordination task from the Treasury to the Cabinet Office along with the growing clutch of Number 10 upon Community business, and the confirmation of the FCO as the main operator between Whitehall and the continent.

The creation of the Cabinet Office European Unit (COEU) as a perennial Cabinet Committee at official level was the main innovation of the period. Having received various denominations up to the last phase of negotiations (Bulmer & Burch, 2009: 72), it was confirmed as the chief organ coordinating the position of the various departments involved after Britain's entry. The moment when the COEU was formally renamed European *Secretariat* cannot be dated exactly: the papers refer often to the "European Section" of the Cabinet Office and so does Michael

² Starting with the long *Narrative Report on the Brussels Negotiations E.E.C-EURATOM-ECSC* of 1963. United Kingdom National Archives (henceforth UKNA), FO 371/ 177 369.



Franklin in his memoranda on the Cabinet Office³ but it seems that the word “secretariat” was the most circulated as early as 1972.

Was the Cabinet Office European Secretariat (COES) inspired, or modelled on its French counterpart, the *Secrétariat Général du Comité Interministériel pour les questions de coopération économique européenne* (SGCI) or was it a genuine British organ? Scholars and practitioners acknowledged at that time and later, that the SGCI was perceived as a major factor of the notoriously efficient policy of France in the Community. But if the British *Secretariat* had some similarities with the French *Secrétariat*, very few actors would admit the latter was a model, and barely an inspiration, apart, unsurprisingly, from Michael Palliser admitting that the British “had borrowed [them]selves on the French⁴”. Although it is contradicted by the papers⁵, the insistence on the “Britishness” of the COES could be seen as a sign of professional pride and parochialism, mixed with a touch of jingoism⁶, on a question that ultimately sounds irrelevant. On the one hand, the COES belonged to Whitehall’s long-established tradition of Cabinet committees coordinating ministerial positions: the genesis and plasticity of the COEU dating back to the *Mutual Aid Committee* of the 1950s made it a typical Whitehall product, with changes in its chair and structure reflecting the changing balance of power within Cabinet. Along with the British bureaucratic tradition, officials used to describe the COES as a lighter and more flexible organ than its French opposite, while demonstrating the same efficiency: that opinion was grounded on facts – for the SGCI had many more officials than the COES and its processes dated back to the early 1950s – as much as it paid tribute to the *topos* of the ponderous French bureaucracy.

³ Churchill Archives Centre (henceforth CAC), The Papers of Sir Michael Franklin, FKLN, 3/1, « The Cabinet Office », non dated.

⁴ Interview with author 25/01/2011

⁵ “We have studied with great interest the work of the SGCI under M. Bornard in Paris (...). There are lessons to be learnt here”. UKNA, CAB 193/174, « Europe : Organisation ». Note by Burke Trend, Secretary to the Cabinet Office, 9 May 1972

⁶ Michael Franklin wrote that “it was generally acknowledged in Brussels that, whatever other faults the British had, they were the best-coordinated member state”. CAC: The Papers of Sir Michael Franklin, FKLN, 3/1, « The Cabinet Office », p. 2.



On the other hand, it should be noted that the French body had been carefully scrutinized by the British since the mid-Sixties, with the diplomats of the British Embassy in Paris regularly reporting about its functioning. Immediately after entry, officials were being sent on the continent to learn and get accustomed with Community procedures – and with the French language that was dominant in the institutions: many of them took training and language courses in Paris at the *École Nationale d'Administration* and were keen to observe the French European machinery. Reports on the SGCI were produced then, such as the one written by Graham Avery from the Ministry of Agriculture who was following a training course at the ENA in Spring 1972 before being sent to the Commission, or another report signed by the Third Secretary in the British embassy in Paris Ivor Roberts, and celebrated within Whitehall circles⁷. So if the COES borrowed some of its features from the SGCI, it might have been indirectly, in a period when French and British officials were entertaining close contacts, while bilateral diplomacy with France was treated as a key-element to the success of British entry and its first steps in the Community. The two bodies had in common their privileged institutional relationship with the Prime Minister and the President, and an intense collaboration with the Permanent Representation in Brussels⁸.

B. Spreading the Europeanists: musical chairs and networks

No revolution occurred in the progressive transformation of COEU to COES but the men appointed to carry British European policy on the reception side as much as on the projection side were carefully chosen, so that the transition would be as smooth as possible for Britain from the status of applicant to the status of a full new member. In the early years of British membership, it seemed

⁷ Interview with author, 09/06/2012

⁸ In the French case, SGCI and PermRep were both collaborators and competitors while the relationship was more symbiotic on the British side with the participation of the British Permanent Representative to the weekly meeting in the Cabinet Office.



that almost all members of the “elite regiment” (Young, 1999: 172-214)⁹ had been appointed to strategic positions where they would be able first to handle community business immediately and efficiently and also to share their European experience with peers and colleagues. Among the Europeanists, the members of the negotiating team of the 1970-1972 were the most famous: if Sir Con O’Neill retired in 1972, his deputy John Robinson, the man “who knew everything and everyone in Brussels” resumed his job as Under-Secretary in the section of the FCO he had contributed himself to rename “European Integration Department” a few years before. Other members of the team were promoted to the highest administrative rank of Permanent Under Secretary (PUS): Roy Denman was moved from the Department of Trade and Industry to the Cabinet Office in 1975 before he was appointed Director General in DG I; Frederick “Freddie” Kearns was promoted PUS in the Ministry of Agriculture (1973-78), while Michael Franklin, his close friend and colleague from the negotiating team spent four years in the Secretary General of the Commission before coming back to London as Deputy Secretary and Head of the European Section of the Cabinet Office, in 1977. Michael Palliser had also been a key-operator of Britain’s European policy, from his time as Harold Wilson’s Principal Private Secretary, via the British Embassy in Paris where he had been Heath’s interpreter during his meeting with Pompidou in May 1971. Not surprisingly, he was the first British Permanent Representative and ambassador to the Communities and he was followed by David Hannay, another diplomat who had served in the negotiating team and who joined the *cabinet* of Christopher Soames in the Commission. Palliser then moved back to London and was promoted Permanent Secretary in the Foreign Office and Head of the Diplomatic Service where he stayed from 1975 to 1982.

None of those officials would have admitted the idea of an organized network of Europeanists within Whitehall and surely expressed mere scepticism to the later assertion of Tony Benn “the bureaucracy of the Common Market [had]

⁹ The handful of senior officials who had been in charge of Britain’s application, some of them for almost 10 years.



contaminated the heart of Whitehall¹⁰". More simply, they formed an informal group of people who, without any specific agenda, knew one another and would exchange information, ideas and even positions when it was in what they perceived as the interest of Britain¹¹. The first key postings had been monitored at the highest level under Edward Heath, but when Labour returned to power with a far less enthusiastic European stance, officials experienced with Community matters remained in place and a sort of informal co-optation system continued at least until 1979: for instance, Brian Crowe was appointed Counsellor and then Head of the Policy Planning Staff at the FCO in 1976 after he was recommended by Nicholas "Nicko" Henderson, "his" ambassador in Bonn, to Michael Palliser for his European credentials. He would then be sent as Head of Chancery in UKREP in 1979, the same year Peter Pooley, a veteran from the application of 1961, was seconded from the MAFF to become Minister responsible for agriculture in UKREP.

C. A new hierarchy?

Did Britain's membership to the EEC reshuffle the hierarchy of departments in the village of Whitehall? Wallace and Wallace forecast as early as 1973 that technical and previously "low-profile" ministries such as the MAFF and the DTI would see their rank fostered by their new day-to-day involvement in Community affairs (Wallace & Wallace, 1973: 257-258). There is not clear evidence of a significant redistribution of powers and influence within the Cabinet and Whitehall during the Seventies, and in 1974 the new Foreign Secretary Jim Callaghan seemed even to ignore the meaning of the acronym MAFF (Denman, 2002: 159). It is rather at individual level that officials from those departments could see their career take a more international and eminent path. From the first

¹⁰ *Arguments for Democracy*, quoted par Jim Buller & Martin J. Smith, « Civil Service Attitudes Towards the European Union » in D. Baker & D. Seawrith (ed.), *Britain For and Against Europe. British Politics and the Question of European Integration*, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1998, p. 167

¹¹ Michael Franklin and Michael Palliser for instance, used to lunch together on a monthly basis from 1977 to 1982 to keep each other informed about things coming up.



application to the accession negotiation, some officials of the MAFF had been involved into frequent multilateral negotiations and had accordingly developed skills and expertise in things European at a higher level than other and more prestigious departments as, for instance, the Treasury. Some negotiators of the MAFF had become almost public figures and their names appeared in the Press such as those of Eric Roll in the early 1960s or Michael Franklin and Freddie Kearns in the early Seventies. More junior figures confirmed their career had been obviously boosted by their European involvement: Graham Avery, a junior official of 28 was then representing the MAFF in the team drafting the accession Treaty in 1971¹².

The position of the Cabinet Office was obviously enhanced by Britain's entry to the EEC, as its European Unit/Secretariat would soon constitute the centre of Whitehall's European hub (Bulmer and Burch, 2009: 91). But it should be noted that this confirmed a tendency that had to do more with the general evolution of the British central government and the steady rise of the figure of the Prime Minister (Hennessy: 2000, *passim*). The FCO and the Treasury still retained a major influence over the European policy decided in London: the former was the major intercessor between London, Brussels and the 8, and the chief source of information for Whitehall, via UKREP. The Treasury, though it had handed over a large part of its initial role of coordination to the Cabinet Office, still retained major resources and, above all, a firm political grip on vast areas of policies in the late 1970s. The negotiations of the EMS in 1977-78 showed clearly that N°11 had still a considerable influence over Britain's European policy, precisely because the department had always adopted a rather cautious if not sceptical approach to the Community, and a wary vigilance over the issue of economic sovereignty. No wonder, then, that a Second Permanent Secretary from the Treasury, Kenneth Couzens, was chosen to represent the Prime Minister in the secret talks of the "Group of three" in April 1978, while chairing the chief Cabinet Committee on EMS (Raineau, 2012: 156-157; Murlon-Druol, 2012: 177-183). On a more subtle

¹² Interview with author, 09/06/2012



note, though not trivial in Whitehall's symbolism, it should be noted that the rank of the senior official heading the European section in the Cabinet Office had been downgraded after 1977: taking over for Roy Denman in this post, Michael Franklin was not promoted Permanent Secretary and he remained Deputy Secretary, then being overtly by-passed and subdued by Couzens whom, he admitted "would never come to a Cabinet Office meeting on EMS¹³".

Whether a network of Europeanists existed or not in Whitehall in the Seventies, it should be concluded that they were nothing more than a handful of senior figures scattered in a rather vast bureaucratic land in London. The spirit of Whitehall remained somehow isolated from Community affairs and the majoritarian opinion at the most senior level was probably a polite, if not derogatory scepticism towards the Common Market. European experts were still frowned upon in the mid-Seventies, especially those who had spent time some time in Brussels. If Roy Denman account may not be totally objective, his recollection of meetings of Permanent Secretaries¹⁴ where the expression "Eurocrap" was "greeted by sympathetic titter" (Denman, 2002: 176), might not be totally inaccurate.

II. "Thinking European"?

A. An overall plan, various initiatives

After the period of negotiation, Whitehall was getting ready to make the government fulfil its European duties. On that matter, the leadership of Ted Heath was decisive for he ceaselessly encouraged ministers and officials in Whitehall to "think European¹⁵" as much and as fast as possible. With the idea of a specific ministry dedicated to Europe quickly dismissed, and the arrangements made to locate the coordination engine in the Cabinet Office,

¹³ Interview with author, 07 /02/ 2012

¹⁴ Aged 51, he was the youngest member in 1975.

¹⁵ UKNA, CAB 193/173, "Organisational arrangements for the coordination of European policy": *passim*: several documents contain the expression.



ministries were encouraged to foster and put forward their European section. Most Whitehall departments started to adjust their internal organization to incorporate Community business into their existing responsibilities: the general pattern was usually for the External Relations Division to become the point of coordination within each department as a small alerting unit, rather than for separate European divisions to be created (Wallace, 1973: 91). The MAFF and the DTI obviously took the PM's injunction seriously and, under the supervision of the Cabinet Office, manifested somehow their European good will, hammering out a few innovations. In a typical Whitehall fashion, they started with the common proposal to draft of a "Eurocode", a comprehensive series of guidelines for central departments to dispose of the perfect *vade mecum* for their official novices in Community matters, covering both fields of formulation and execution of policy¹⁶. On its own side, the DTI launched a monthly internal newsletter untitled *The European Communities and the DTI* dealing with all aspects of Community issues¹⁷ from the point of view of the department's interests.

If those two departments had to come to grips without delay with their new role in Community dealings and negotiations, would other departments, more remote from the spectrum of Community competences, answer the call of Edward Heath? On this matter, ministerial impulsion and leadership was to play a decisive role and the frequent changes in the British government during the following years does not help the observer to have a clear picture of this trend. While it was barely concerned, if concerned at all, by Community affairs, the Home Office appears for a while as one of the most proactive departments, eager to extend its European dimension: this was explained by the return to the ministry in March 1974 of Roy Jenkins, one of the staunchest pro-European in British politics. In 1975, Jenkins' Private Office requested a memorandum "surveying the whole field of Home Office work and its interaction with the Community" whose final version was monitored by the Cabinet Office. Concluding that it was "difficult to see

¹⁶ *Ibid.* "Eurocode": Suggested outline", note by S. R. Chandler, 6 July 1975

¹⁷ *Ibid.* Issue of October 1973. It seems that the initiative was stopped with the change of government a few months later.



scope for great initiatives”, the memorandum assessed that “the obvious growth area was lie[d] in social policies¹⁸”. Even less surprisingly, the senior official executing the request of the Home Secretary’s was the now Deputy Under-Secretary in the Home Office, Robert Armstrong: he had been Ted Heath’s Principal Private Secretary and close adviser for five years at N°10, then monitoring carefully that Whitehall was doing its best to “think European” after 1973¹⁹.

B. *Une éducation européenne*

Spreading European expertise within Whitehall was among the great challenges the central government faced when Britain joined the EEC. The distribution and use of European skills and expertise among the main departments involved with Community business was surely scarce, and it was a priority for the government to improve the situation so that the UK could be a good European and punch its real weight in Brussels. With Ted Heath leaving office in Spring 1974, it somehow slowed down the process he had launched to make Whitehall “think European”.

Training resources for civil servants were not formalized in general in those years, and the tradition of training on the spot after a rather short – though brilliant-university career, was still largely dominant in the 1970s. The Civil Service College had been created in 1970, largely as a consequence of the Fulton Report of 1968 that had advocated for better training and expertise for generalist mandarins (Lowe, 2011: 115-120), especially in economics, but the institution was brand new, and by no means staffed with sufficient teachers or scholars specialized in European affairs. For a few years after 1973, arrangements for training civil servants in European matters were designed on a threefold *ad hoc* basis.

For the most urgent matters, namely the British who were supposed to start working in Brussels in 1973, in UKREP or in the institutions, training was focused mainly on languages, especially French that was then the dominating working idiom in the EEC. To this purpose, Paris and the long established *ENA*

¹⁸ *Ibid.* « The Home Office in Europe », 8 July 1975.

¹⁹ Interview with author, 12/06/2012



provided an immediate solution with training sessions in French and European disciplines organized at ENA before accession. Graham Avery recalled his six weeks induction at ENA in mid-1972 “basically learning French, but also learning about the French administration (...) with several lectures in Ministries about the French juridical system and the French culture” and also “a regional trip (...) to the Préfecture de la Loire²⁰”.

Second, on a longer-term basis, the Cabinet Office and the Civil Service Department made arrangements to organize sessions of “EEC courses” at the Civil Service College, on its various sites in the UK. The papers show that a significant part of the staff recruited for these courses consisted of foreign teachers, notably Dutch and German, scholars or practitioners either living in the UK or coming directly from Brussels²¹.

The last solution was to take advantage of the experience of the senior officials that had acquired Community experience in the past decade, especially those who had participated to the various rounds of negotiations since 1963, or those who had hold the European desks in the ministries in the 1960s. Certainly the most prestigious, and maybe the most courted speaker, was the newly retired diplomat and ex-head of the last negotiating team Con O’Neill. It seems from the official papers and from O’Neill’s private papers that no sooner had he left the Diplomatic Service in 1972 that he donned the academic gown to pass on his European experience all over the country²². Con O’Neill had indeed already taken part in the public debate about Europe in the late 1960: after he had resigned from the Foreign Service for the second time²³, he had resumed a career in journalism, writing authoritative columns about Britain and Europe in *The Times*, while he joined at the same moment the Executive Committee of the

²⁰ Interview with author, 09/06/2011

²¹ UKNA, CAB 193/173: “Courses at the Civil Service College, Edinburgh Centre”, notes by B. M. Webster of 12 December 1972 and D. Evans of 3 January 1973 + schedule of courses for weeks 1 and 2.

²² Bodleian Library Special Collections, MSS. Eng., Papers of Sir Con O’Neill c. 6059-65

²³ Con O’Neill had admittedly resigned for he had not been appointed ambassador to Germany, a post he had coveted for a long time.



British Council of the European Movement²⁴. Straight after he retired, O'Neill took an impressive series of public commitments to talk about Britain and Europe, in academic forums and others. As early as October 1972, he was talking at Chatham House on "The Impact of UK/EEC entry o UK law and practice"²⁵. In the following two years, he provided expertise and training, chairing the Intervention Board for Agricultural Produce, the main department charged with administering agricultural payments in the UK after 1973²⁶. On November 1972, he was lecturing on the Common Market both to the 16th Parachute brigade and to the Civil Service College, and in the first months of 1973, he embarked on a programme of 9 lectures for the Staff Training Branch of the MAFF²⁷. His activity of lecturer kept Sir Con busy for almost a decade for he was still lecturing at the Centre for European Agricultural Studies sited in Wye College in 1979²⁸.

Conclusion. The machine and the men at work: lessons for a decade

To the historian examining the British Civil Service at both collective and individual level, the decade that followed Britain's entry into the EEC is a challenge. On the one hand, a sort of linearity is perceivable as it often is when one considers the long history of the Civil Service. To prepare Britain's membership, officials demonstrated the high professionalism that had made their reputation for decades, with the quiet confidence that Whitehall machinery would fit Britain's new Europe role perfectly. The papers show the classic qualities of which British officials have always taken pride: constant anticipation of events and changes, pragmatism and caution in action, constant care of sharing

²⁴ Bodleian Library Special Collections, MSS. Eng., Papers of Sir Con O'Neill, c. 6061, *folio* 1. See for instance, "Britain Prospects in Europe", *The Times*, 04/06/1968

²⁵ *Ibid.* c. 6062, *folio* 3, 15

²⁶ Roy Denman, 'O'Neill, Sir Con Douglas Walter (1912–1988)', rev. *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, Oxford University Press, 2004 [[http://www.oxforddnb.com /view/article/39892](http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/39892), accessed 27 May 2010]

²⁷ Bodleian Library Special Collections, MSS. Eng., Papers of Sir Con O'Neill, c. 6062, *folio* 75, 149, 152.

²⁸ *Ibid.* c. 6069, *folio* 72-74

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information and coordinating of all the departments involved, loyalty to ministers and to the Cabinet.

On the other hand, this continuity appears somehow and frequently disrupted by contradictory political injunctions that were due to the developments of British political life in the 1970s. The quick departure of Edward Heath 1974 might have undermined the clear directive of “thinking European” for many officials and departments, while the strange two-fold exercise of the renegotiation and the referendum campaign summoned, for another round of two years, the energy of those officials that could have played a role of European brokers in Whitehall circles. For many senior officials who had kept a sceptical mind about the Common Market – and they may have been a majority- the uncertainty of the political line did not encourage them to bet on Europe as a career booster, and build a European capital which they could benefit from in the short term.

For politics mattered dramatically in those years: Europe was already demonstrating its “fissile effect” (Young, 1999: 257) in British politics, which did not help the top hierarchy of Whitehall to determine and/or understand what politicians and the public saw as the country’s interest. Quite symptomatic of those unpredictable times was the situation of the Foreign Office when David Owen became Foreign Secretary in 1977: while he was notoriously a pro-European Labour politician, he was keen on keeping good relations with the Anti-Marketeers in the Cabinet. His term at the FCO was marked by a frank hostility between him and his senior officials, from the Permanent Under Secretary Michael Palliser to the British Ambassador in Paris Nicholas Henderson, whom he suspected to nurture federalist preferences and to follow a secret European agenda. The mismatch between the minister and his office may have been quite detrimental to the position of the FCO on some major issues at that time, such as the European Monetary System in 1977-1978. The Foreign Secretary did by no means stand for the political case of EMS, leaving the hand to the Treasury along with N°10 for an exclusively economic approach that led to the non-participation of Britain.

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