

Book Review

Anand Menon (ed.) *Britain and European Integration. Views from Within*, Oxford: Blackwell in association with The Political Quarterly, (2004)

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This slim but interesting volume is an offprint from the Political Quarterly. It contains contributions by all eight of the United Kingdom's Permanent Representatives in Brussels, summarizing and reflecting on their tenures.

They do this more or less in line with the questions initially given them by Anand Menon, and set out in his introduction. These touch on the workings of the British machine and the structure within which the Representatives operated. He then pulls some of the threads together at the end, setting the practitioners' views in the context of academic discussion, and giving a flavour of the debate in the seminar when the contributions were first presented. The result whets appetites but those doing research on Britain and Europe, may go away still hungry.

A number of common themes emerge from the contributions. All of them pay tribute to the high quality of the staff in the Permanent Representation, its unhierarchical nature and the way it is plugged into Whitehall. The role of UKRep is shown to have changed over the years and, while it still has negotiation at its core, it has widened its range of contacts and responsibilities, notably with the arrival of devolution and the growing importance of the European Parliament. Increasingly there is a public relations and lobbying dimension to the job.

In fact the contributors have much to say on the press. For, while this caused few problems in the early days, as Donald Maitland notes, increasingly Fleet Street has been a cross which 'our Man in Brussels' has had to bear. The developing groundswell of media opposition to things European has, in practical terms, proved counter productive, making it harder for UKRep to defend British interests. The press is seen as uninterested in patient committee work and positive relations, preferring to see the UK as isolated and enjoying making things out to be worse than they are. All this points up the importance of domestic politics in the functioning of UKRep, something which has become more marked and more intertwined with European affairs with the passage of time as John Grant says. Michael Palliser rightly says that the 1975 referendum did not disarm British Euroscepticism while David Hannay notes that the fact that Mrs Thatcher's Bruges speech caused so much furore that its positive side got much overlooked. And her obsession with preventing German unification ended by cementing the Franco-German alliance.

John Kerr also points to the effect that Tory splits had on John Major's policy so that by 1997 there was serious doubt on the continent as to whether the UK had real commitment to European integration. Interestingly Stephen Wall defends non-cooperation and the opt out policy, since the latter allowed other states to go ahead. He also argues that no British government, as opposed to oppositions, has ever actually been really anti-European. However, other contributors point to the fact that other member states did find the UK irritating even while admiring its administrative efficiency. Hence they saw more continuity than change once the Blair government's honeymoon period came to an end, as Nigel Scheinwald puts it.

Over time, of course, the issues facing UKRep have changed. In the 1960s it was entry negotiations which dominated, in the 1970s the 'so called' renegotiations and the referendum, then the budget question, the SEA process, coping with the travails of the Major government and, finally, the increasing amount of CFSP business. And most of the contributors are very aware of the impact of enlargement. In the early days COREPER seems to have been a sort of informal lunch club. Now it is a formal meeting with microphones.

In the course of this some vignettes, helpful to writers of student essays, emerge, including on the way that, thanks to Danes and the Irish, English became the leading language. Mrs Thatcher's ability to cope without sleep and with whiskey, as noted by Michael Butler, is also to be marvelled at, as is the Eurosceptic minister whose lack of a sense of humour caused him to believe there was an official COREPER uniform. Equally it is interesting to know that having ambushed Mrs Thatcher into an IGC, the other member states showed that they had no real idea of what they wanted to achieve in it, thereby facilitating British pushing for the Single Market.

Menon's take on all this is that, while the system is indeed strong and effective, there are questions on the horizon. Not merely could devolution become a problem but other countries could improve their efficiency so that the UK is no longer ahead of the game. More significantly, Menon points out that the centralized nature of the system - and its responsiveness to Westminster which all too often ignores the details of Union life - can produce inflexibility and inhibit coalition building. The general consensus of approach that emerges from the contributions certainly says something about civil service culture. In addition he argues that the system is better suited to defensive strategies rather than to positive and proactive stances, something seemingly borne out by the 2005 UK Presidency.

He also points out that, as several contributors have shown, that over the last few years the EU has moved in a direction helpful to the UK in terms of its diversity, its liberalism and the lessening of the Franco-German role. Yet, as this has happened, British press reporting has become increasingly acerbic and negative, reducing the government's freedom of manoeuvre. This is something which he would like to see the government tackle head on but he laments the lack of follow up to Blair's occasional speeches. Hence he fears that the future will continue to see the government running scared and thus squandering the gains made in recent years, especially if the move away from dirigisme, which may not have been as great as suggested anyway, is halted by the rejection of the Constitutional Treaty.

While this is, unfortunately, all too likely, there are some other, more political, points which emerged from the book. One is that civil servants responsible for running our relations with Europe are not always totally convinced by the policies they have to apply, even though they do this very effectively. Another is the extent to which those policies are determined by the media. So the collection, despite its brevity, is one which will certainly stimulate studies of evolving UK policy to the EU.

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This book, which originated in a January 2004 roundtable co-hosted at the Institute of Directors by Birmingham University's European Research Institute and the law firm S. J. Berwin, sets out to examine two related facets of European Union policy-making in Britain: first of all the changing role of Permanent Representatives in the British administrative system, and secondly Britain's evolving relationship with the EU. It does so through the lenses of Britain's eight Permanent Representatives to the EC/EU since 1973. Its contents first appeared in the *Political Quarterly* in 2004. Each speaker was given eight minutes to talk to a demanding brief covering the following five themes: the nature of the post of UK Permanent Representative to the EC/EU; the functions of the post; the role and functions of the Permanent Representative in the system in place in the UK for coordinating its EU policies; their experiences of working in Brussels; and finally their experience of working in the EU system more generally. The proceedings published here are the slightly unsatisfactory result.

Through the personal testimonies included in the volume the editor arrives at three sets of conclusions, which are illuminating to a degree, but hardly the stuff to make students of the EU sit

up in amazement. The first and most interesting set pertains to the role and functioning of the Permanent Representative in the British system. The mini-biographies of the speakers and their articles show how, increasingly, the role of Permanent Representative has become one for EU specialists, and how it has further become a stepping stone for even more prestigious appointments afterwards. The involvement of the Permanent Representative in the Whitehall machine has also undergone huge change, if not transformation, albeit one that may not endure, in Menon's opinion, over the long-term. The second conclusion is that enlargements of the Union have heavily impacted on the work of COREPER by distilling some of the intimacy that characterised relations among its members to the mid 1990s, and by making it a less flexible, more unwieldy, decision-making tool. The third conclusion concerns the UK's ongoing troubled relationship with the EU. It is telling that, despite not being asked to address the question directly, all but one of the contributors to the volume (Stephen Wall) mentions the role of the British press in fomenting scepticism in Britain about the EU. Following the Permanent Representatives, Menon's judgement is that this is detrimental to European policy-making in Britain and to the public's outlook on Europe more generally.

All in all this is a valuable source of personal testimony, albeit one that leaves the reader wanting more, and wishing the contributors had had more time and space to cover the many issues they were asked to tackle. It is also a case study in the limits of diplomatic witness history, especially when that history is still being made in the present (everyone in the British and EU administrative machines are found to be 'good eggs', as per the usual diplomatic discourse). It seems we will have to wait several years before detailed critiques of the work of the Permanent Representatives emerge if indeed they ever do.