

The European Union

It is hard, these days, to find a policy area that could never become the subject of a discussion at the European level. The following chapter gives advice on working effectively in Europe, and summarises some key facts about the structure of the institutions.

Major differences

The EU is neither a traditional international organisation like the UN or the OECD, nor is it a true nation state like France or the United Kingdom. Rather, it is a new and different form of association, which needs to be understood on its own terms and not by comparison to other, perhaps more familiar models. This is particularly important when looking at European legislation, which is binding and is often agreed by some form of majority voting. This, along with the fact that European law has *supremacy* over national law – in other words, if the two conflict, then European law wins out – makes for a very different dynamic.

Working the European Union machine is therefore quite different to working the Whitehall machine. Some of the more obvious differences between the UK and 'Europe' are as follows:

- Within the UK Parliamentary system, Parliament and the Government are uniquely powerful. Within Europe, both Ministers and officials are negotiators, applicants or supplicants.
- There is no UK equivalent of the Qualified Majority Voting (QMV) system, or of the need for unanimity.
- The practical application of our negotiating strength can be troublesome. For instance, if there is a need for unanimity then in theory we have a veto. But it is not expected that anyone should use the veto at all frequently. Rather it is a card that can from time to time be played to achieve a national objective. If we do not recognise this, then others will not make concessions to the UK, since nothing can be secured in return, and bad feelings will spill over into other areas.
- Where QMV applies, our strength is even more circumscribed. One country alone cannot block progress and usually will be isolated if it tries. This can lead to a less palatable result than constructive engagement would have achieved.
- There is no UK equivalent of the Council of Ministers or the Commission. It is a great mistake to treat the Commission as though it were simply some sort of supra-national civil service – it clearly also has a political role.
- Commission officials tend to be very good or rather poor, with rather fewer moderate

performers than one might expect.

- The Commission is very vertically organised, so that there is often poor working level co-ordination within the Commission, whether between or within directorates-general. This gives great power to the cabinets of the various Commissioners. Incidentally, two Commissioners are also Vice-Presidents of the Commission, currently with special responsibilities for relations with the European Parliament and for Commission reform.
- It is also notable that the Commissioners, their cabinets and their officials ('Services') are very open – arguably more accessible to lobbyists and industry than their equivalents in national governments. Partly because the Services are thinly staffed, they have very little information of their own. It can be very helpful if you are the person who briefs them. But watch out for competitive lobbying from the opposition, whoever they may be.
- Relations between civil servants and Members of the European Parliament are also different. Unlike within Westminster, direct contact with MEPs of all parties (and all countries) is not only allowed, it is to be encouraged.
- UKRep too (our permanent representatives in Brussels and Luxembourg) are very happy to meet and help British lobbyists who need advice on operating the Brussels machine.
- EU officials in the Council, Commission and Parliament are almost always very pro-European, as are a large number of your opposite numbers in other national delegations. Even if you hate the very idea of European integration or the single currency, you may find you get a more receptive audience to your lobbying if you hide your views and couch your comments and arguments in 'communautaire' (EU-friendly) language.