Book Review: How Europe Shapes British Public Policy

Blog Admin

*This book considers the effects of EU membership in shaping key policy areas – trade and privatisation, the single market and the environment, and subsidiarity in the development and implementation of devolved and decentralised governance. **Janice Morphet** discusses the effects of disengagement through the political practices of policy making and the implications that this has had for depoliticisation in government and the civil service. **Alastair Hill** recommends the read to political science students, especially those interested in policy-making across Europe.*

How Europe Shapes British Public Policy. Janice Morphet. Policy Press. April 2013.

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With a referendum on the European Union looming, Janice Morphet's book *How does Europe Shape British Public Policy?* wastes little time in acknowledging that European remains "a sectarian issue in UK".

Lamentably, Morphet also quickly recognises that Britain's relationship with the EU is frequently presented in rather simplistic terms. Most commonly, the EU is presented as being a straightforward case of a foreign institution 'taking away' Britain's sovereign powers. In this book Morphet attempts to challenge this premise, primarily asserting that the narrative for the EU as a 'pooling of powers' has never been offered in the UK. Instead the EU is promoted solely as a club in the UK, which "has rules that have to be kept in general". The fact that the clubs rules are now deemed too onerous by large numbers of British politicians, and indeed large sections of the British public, perhaps explains much of the uncertainty around future membership.

In this wide-ranging text Morphet expertly traces the provenance of the uneasiness which surrounds Britain's relationship with the Union. She does this primarily by highlighting two key elements in Britain's relationship with the EU. Firstly, Morphet suggests that Britain has historically played a *defensive* role in the EU when it comes to policy negotiation, and secondly, she highlights what she terms Britain's *receptor* stance when it comes to policy-implementation. In other words, Britain occupies a curious position in the Union, largely being un-engaged in policy development, or worse still, sometimes positively obstructive, yet, once policies are agreed, Britain more often than not goes on to implement them diligently.

In developing this, Morphet makes a sophisticated argument around the differences in British and EU public policy-making. This analysis forms the rump of her book, and it is impressive in both its scope and depth. For practitioners of politics and policy the first four chapters in particular are certainly worth reading. As well as incisively analysing how the UK and EU policy-making interact, Morphet also covers recent changes in the UK civil service in great detail. This tracks the Conservatives' efficiency reforms in the 1980's through to the advent of New Public Management under New Labour, and up to the concurrent trends of 'contestability' under the Coalition. Similarly, with the Scottish referendum also around the corner, Morphet's analysis on the effects of devolution on the civil service are also particularly interesting.
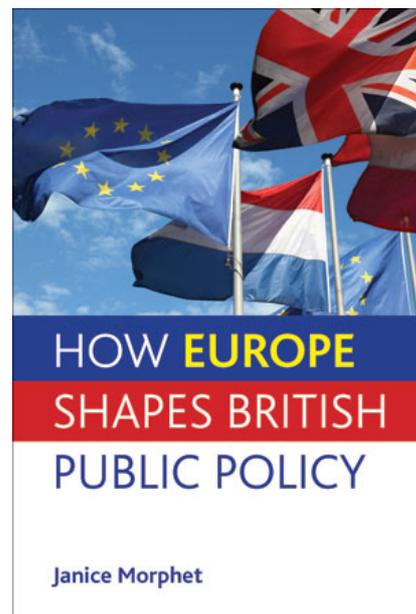
In first analysing how policy is made in the UK, Morphet asserts that UK policy-making agendas are "responsive, flexible and short-term, rather than strategic". Episodes in policy-making are created through set-pieces such as Queen's Speeches, General Elections and so-called 'machinery of government' changes, such as reshuffles. Moreover, civil servants in the UK are generalists, largely versed in how government works rather than some specific policy area. In contrast to this 'short-termist', more episodic approach, EU policy-making sees long-term objectives set through the treaties agreed by member states. It is planned and programmatic. Moreover, EU policy-making is also indirect as it relies on interpretation by member states.

The result, asserts Morphet, has been a clear inconsistency between the UK's episodic government processes and the EU's more flowing manner of negotiation. The tendency of UK policy-making to focus on ministerial meetings and key events clearly translates into their manner of negotiation in the EU, argues Morphet. Perhaps to give some illustration, Cameron's veto in 2011, blocking EU treaty changes to protect Britain's financial services, seems a reasonable case in point. While for a UK audience these key events symbolise key events in the policy-making process, the reality is in Europe policy negotiations are much longer and more informal.

Upon identifying this tension, Morphet then goes on to assess the effects of EU membership in shaping key policy areas: trade and privatisation, the single market and the environment, and subsidiarity in the development and implementation of devolved and decentralised governance. Again, the scope and depth of these sections is exceptional. Morphet highlights numerous policy agendas which have their provenance in the EU that have nevertheless dominated UK policy-making in recent years. These include localism, the opening up of public services to competition, and devolution to name a few. Hence, while Morphet highlights in the first half of her book that the UK operates with a 'defensive stance' in the EU policy-making arena, in the second half she stresses that when it comes to implementing finalised policy, the UK is very much assiduous in implementation.

Morphet's conclusion is that "British public policymaking needs to be relocated and refocused, even if the UK continues to adopt a 'receptor' stance for EU policy". The main difficulties and challenges to this are the "habituated cultures, opaque discussions and decisions detached from delivery". It's a conclusion which is rather hard to argue with. UK politicians have historically done little to extol the benefits of the Union, and undoubtedly the benefits of a 'pooling of powers' has never clearly been made in the UK. Much of this remains a problem of education, and Morphet is exactly right that public understanding of the UK's role within pooled EU policy would be a sensible first step "to internalising these discussions as a part of the daily political round", and towards "more informed engagement in the debates around the UK's future".

That said, Morphet could perhaps offer more analysis on the Union's emerging macro changes which may have an even more significant impact on the UK's ability to shape policy. While she acknowledges that much of the EU's strategy is built around achieving 'ever closer union', and that this is a 'key driver of policy making', perhaps more attention should be paid the fact that this is the precise objection for the majority of the EU's more enlightened critics in Britain. For those on both the centre left and right in the UK, there remain concerns around how increasing integration will play out, particularly regarding ongoing discussions concerning the Eurozone. That said, at the time of writing, Angela Merkel has since been re-elected in Germany and the British Prime Minister David Cameron continues to embark on his mission to reshape Britain's relationship. To some extent Britain now shapes public policy in Europe more effectively than it has since Mrs Thatcher. The Germans and Northern Europeans now share many of Britain's views on the need for competitiveness reforms to improve flexibility within the Union. This has seen Britain hold more weight at the EU table recently.

Nevertheless, Cameron's attempts will be in vain if the British public side against him, or if a two-speed Europe overtakes events. The extent to which Britain shapes and plays an active role in the European Union, if at all, remains very much in the balance.

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