The UK government's review of EU competences offers valuable academic insights into both Britain and the EU

The British government's 'Review of the Balance of Competences' into the European Union's role in British life is surrounded by political tensions. **Tim Oliver** *argues that beyond the controversy, the review also offers a unique insight into the operation of British government, the politics of the UK's coalition government, UK-EU relations, and the evolution of the EU. Academics may well look back in future years at the review as a useful opportunity to study both the UK and European integration.*

The UK government's announcement in July 2012 that, as agreed at the insistence of the Conservative Party as part of the 2010 Coalition Agreement, it was to conduct a full review of the EU's involvement in British life, has now reached its half way stage. In July 2013 the government published six reviews: health, taxation, the single market, animal health and welfare and food safety, development cooperation and humanitarian aid, and foreign policy. A total of 32 reviews will be published by the autumn of 2014.

Each review follows a similar format: first explaining the historical development of the area reviewed; second, assessing the current situation; third, asking what the UK's national interest is in the area; and finally exploring what options there are for going forward, such as repatriation of powers. The reviews avoid making recommendations, their intention being to inform the political decision that will follow the review. Each draws on evidence submitted in writing or taken in person at a range of meetings. While 26 reports are still to be published, it is already clear that for academics the review can open up to analysis a variety of issues in current British and international politics.

William Hague, Credit: Chatham House (CC-BY-SA-3.0)

Coalition Politics

For students of how the Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition is operating, the political management of the review, its origins and eventual use offer a way of examining how the three groups that shape the government on this issue – Liberal Democrats, the strongly Eurosceptic parts of the Conservative Party, and the less Eurosceptic parts of the Conservative party – approach an issue that deeply divides them. Accusations by John Redwood, a strongly Eurosceptic Conservative MP, that the review is turning into a whitewash shows how it may be seen by some Eurosceptics. Given the depth of such tensions it remains to be seen whether the review will last the course. Nevertheless, both its political outcomes and its use as an instrument for managing such a deep political tension will be a focus for studying the operation of Britain's first post-1945 coalition government.

Operation of Whitehall

It is, of course, nothing new for a government to use a technical, in-depth inquiry to neutralise a sensitive issue. This review, however, will have presented unique challenges for Whitehall, thanks to its implications for coalition relations, cross-governmental scope, international implications and wider domestic sensitivity. The review then offers a unique example of officialdom walking the fine line between the political and technical, with the language used in the review, indeed the very bureaucratic sounding name, intended to ensure it runs as a technical and inherently dull activity. So far the reviews published provide a wealth of technical detail. Nevertheless, despite the 390 public submissions I count so far, questions will inevitably be asked about how open, selective and thorough the process has been. If the review is to serve as a central plank to any British renegotiation then the method of the review, and thus the reliability of the approach, will come under significant political, media and academic scrutiny.

UK-EU Relations

The sheer breadth of the 32 reviews in themselves tell us something about the nature of the UK-EU relationship, something Eurosceptics will point to as what they feel is wrong. At the same time, the detail of the review, and to a lesser extent exercises such as the Conservative group 'Fresh Start', have provided a welcome injection of detailed evidence based analysis to the debate. This in itself is a radical change given how, as the Leveson Report on Press Regulation made clear, Britain's media has often resorted to simply making up stories about the EU. For academic analysis, particular interest will be into how – or if – a technical review shapes final public opinion. Will politicians, the media and voters be swayed by an approach based on the opinions of experts and evidence, or will emotion, gut instinct and made-up stories prevail? And how will the narrow reviews connect to the wider cross-cutting debates about Britain's political economy, identity, constitution, security and place in the world?

For those interested in how a state identifies its national – or European – interests, the review process opens up the British system, although much remains behind closed doors. The evidence submitted to each review lays bare the competition between private, civil society, international, political and governmental interests that so often shape a state's views. It shows an EU member state coming to terms with how to balance sovereignty, competing national and sectoral interests, international obligations and membership of the EU.

The reviews specific purpose of informing a possible renegotiated relationship between the UK and EU, one that is to reflect the UK's national interest, should make it a central point of reference for studying any such attempt. When the history of the 2010-2020 period of UK-EU relations is written it could well be about a renegotiation, an in-out referendum and potentially a withdrawal; events that will have defined so much of UK politics, Britain's place in the world and an EU changed by a change in relations with one of its largest members. The review will underpin much of this, and be referred back to for guidance should the UK opt to withdraw.

Comparisons have already been made with other reviews intended to propose reforms to the EU, such as the Dutch review. The British review will take its place amongst the many studies and academic reviews of an EU in a state of flux. Academics are in a position to put aside the politics that led other member states to decline involvement in what some see as a unilateral British review. Instead we can examine and assess a review that is amongst the most extensive, well-resourced and organised of any review of EU activity since the 2001-2003 European Convention.

The Evolution of the EU

For students of international relations and European integration the review does something we rarely see: a state comprehensively cataloguing the impact on it of the international. Any reading of the reviews also shows how Europeanisation often reflects globalised pressures or wider Western multilateral efforts.

With the EU remaining an organisation of member states, the UK's experiences can to some extent be extrapolated to other member states. Here the scale of EU involvement in British life

might seem to point to some form of downloading or spill-over theory of integration, but the reviews also point to examples where Britain has successfully uploaded or cross-loaded its policy agenda. As Simon Usherwood has noted of the published reviews, that they point to a broadly appropriate balance of competences reflects the complex negotiating system of the EU.

Theoretical debates aside, with the EU in a state of flux the review serves as an exercise of taking-stock of the EU's development, an entity which remains sui generis in international relations. That today many in the EU struggle to think of it as an international organisation, which it technically remains, is demonstrated in page after page of the published reviews.

Conclusion

How will academics analyse the review in several years' time? Will we see it as a futile, politically motivated activity, subsumed into the larger political tensions of the coalition government at a time of heightened tensions between the UK and the EU? Or will we look at both the politics and beyond it to see a review, which while it has its problems, stands as a unique experience for both Britain and the EU, and a unique opportunity for the study of both?

This article originally appeared at our sister site, British Politics and Policy at LSE

Please read our comments policy before commenting.

Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of EUROPP – European Politics and Policy, nor of the London School of Economics.

Shortened URL for this post: **http://bit.ly/HhXlvT**

About the author

Tim Oliver – *Johns Hopkins University*
Tim Oliver is a Fritz Thyssen Transatlantic Post-Doctoral Fellow for International Relations and Security (TAPIR) at the Center for Transatlantic Relations at the Johns Hopkins University Paul H. Nitze School of Advanced International Studies, Washington D.C. Educated at the University of Liverpool and the London School of Economics, he has worked in the European Parliament, the House of Lords, and taught at UCL, LSE and as a senior lecturer at the Royal Military Academy Sandhurst.

October 24th, 2013 | EU institutions, government and politics and enlargement, Tim Oliver | 0 Comments