

The 'Europeanisation' of Social Exclusion: British Adaptation to EU Co-ordination

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The Labour government came to power in 1997 pledging to tackle social exclusion and to end child poverty within a generation. The European Union has also committed to making a decisive impact on poverty and social exclusion within the framework of the Lisbon Strategy of economic and social policy reform. To this end, the EU has adopted an 'open method of co-ordination' intended to stimulate reflection, and to promote action, on member states' policies and strategies to tackle social exclusion. The aim of this article is to analyse and assess this attempt to 'Europeanise' policy-making in the United Kingdom (including the devolved institutions) in the field of social exclusion.

For 18 years, the poorest people in our country have been forgotten by government. They have been left out of growing prosperity, told that they were not needed, ignored by the Government except for the purpose of blaming them. I want that to change. There will be no forgotten people in the Britain I want to build. (Tony Blair's first speech as prime minister, 2 June 1997, Southwark, London)

The number of people living below the poverty line and in social exclusion in the Union is unacceptable. Steps must be taken to make a decisive impact on the eradication of poverty ... (Presidency Conclusion, Lisbon European Council, March 2000).

Introduction

If the poor had been forgotten by successive Conservative administrations in the United Kingdom (UK), the manner in which they have been rediscovered by the Labour government since 1997 is an important test of New Labour's social policies. Not surprisingly, then, academics and political commentators have been keen to analyse the relationship between New Labour and issues of poverty and social exclusion (see Levitas 1998; Newman 2001; Pearce and Paxton 2005; Hills and Stewart 2005). Despite the wealth of analysis of poverty and social exclusion in the UK, remarkably little is said about the European framework within which member states are elaborating their policies. One of Tony Blair's first tasks as prime minister was to attend the European Council meeting in Amsterdam in 1997 at which the member states adopted a new treaty that provided for the European Union (EU) and the member states to take action to combat social exclusion (now Article 137(2) EC). Since 2000, member states' action to tackle poverty and social



exclusion has been co-ordinated—in line with the Lisbon European Council's commitment to make a decisive impact on poverty—through the so-called 'open method of co-ordination' (OMC). While the EU has not been afforded legislative competence to harmonise national laws in this field, through OMC the EU seeks both to stimulate domestic policy processes and to provide a co-ordinating framework for member states to exchange policy ideas and practices. OMC combines centralised processes of European objective setting, performance measurement (in line with agreed indicators) and evaluation (joint review by the European Commission and Council of Ministers) with the decentralised production of National Action Plans on Inclusion (NAPincls). Accordingly, the strategies and policies which the new Labour government put in place to tackle social exclusion are the object of a new EU governance process designed to stimulate domestic policy attention towards people at risk of poverty and social exclusion. The extent to which one can speak of a 'Europeanisation' of British policy through OMC is the subject of this article.

The article proceeds in three main parts. The first part sets out the broad context in which the current OMC process on social inclusion operates. It indicates the emergence of a specifically European language of 'social exclusion' through EU-funded research programmes (evidencing an initial 'Europeanisation' of domestic policy discourses). It also identifies that current EU initiatives to tackle social exclusion draw on, and need to be understood in relation to, economic and employment co-ordination processes operating under the umbrella of the so-called 'Lisbon Strategy' and designed to Europeanise domestic policy in these fields. It is suggested that the social inclusion OMC process is more weakly institutionalised than other co-ordination processes and is more 'open' as to what states may choose to identify as problems requiring solutions. While this suggests that member states are more able to filter and select their domestic responses to the inclusion process, the second part of the article argues that the key determinant of the national policy response is the manner in which domestic structures and agents transform forces emanating from OMC into domestic adaptation pressures. This part of the article draws extensively on the Europeanisation literature but seeks to modify and intensify the analysis in light of its application to a new mode of governance—OMC. It cautions both against overly-strong juxtapositions of the 'Community Method' (characterised by EU law-making) and the 'Open Method', and against treating all OMC processes alike.

The final part of the article adopts an empirical study of UK adaptation to the OMC process on inclusion. The evidence presented suggests a transformation of the working relationships between central government civil servants and a group of social NGOs in the preparation of the NAPincls. Moreover, the emergence of the NAPincls has filled a gap in post-devolution Britain, in providing a platform for central and devolved government strategies to be reported and (perhaps more importantly) evaluated by a variety of actors. While the NAPincls element of the OMC methodology has triggered domestic responses, it is less clear that other elements of the methodology—in particular, the common EU objectives and indicators—are all that significant in stimulating processes of policy problem identification. In part, this is precisely because the UK had put in place policies and strategies in advance of the OMC process. The domestic objectives, indicators and

targets associated with these domestic policies compete with EU sources of influence in terms of their scope, precision, relevance and timeliness. Moreover, while the *problem* of social exclusion has been identified as dynamic and multidimensional, political *solutions* have focused more narrowly on reforms to social welfare systems and labour markets. This allows the UK government to focus on its ongoing domestic policy reforms (and its relatively good performance on economic growth and employment rates) in its response to the OMC inclusion process rather than on the still significant numbers of people living in households with less than 60 per cent of median income and therefore at risk of poverty and social exclusion.

Part I: European Action to Combat Poverty and Social Exclusion

The Language of 'Social Exclusion'

The language of 'social exclusion' has its origins in French social policy. But, as Burchardt, Le Grand and Piachaud note (2002), 'social exclusion' 'is now part of the common currency of British social policy debates' and it is a language very much associated with the election of the Labour government in 1997 (see Levitas 1998). In order to explain why the language emerged in British politics we need to look to an earlier phase of potential Europeanisation in the form of a series of EC action programmes on poverty that began in 1975 and carried on until the early 1990s. While colloquially referred to as the 'Poverty Programmes', the focus on social exclusion emerged at the end of the 1980s. As Graham Room notes (1995, 2–3), one explanation for the shift in language was because, at a political level, some countries were hostile to talking about poverty. However, a fuller explanation for why the discourse 'stuck' lies with establishment of the European Observatory on Policies to Combat Social Exclusion; agreement upon a third action programme ('concerning the economic and social integration of the economically and socially less privileged groups in society'); and the 1989 Council resolution on social exclusion¹ (Berghman 1995). The role of the Observatory was 'to assist the Commission in promoting a transfer of know-how between the member states and an improvement in the effectiveness of their interventions' (Observatory 1991) and can be seen as an early attempt at policy co-ordination in the social exclusion field.

The appeal of the concept of social exclusion is generally that it is understood as multidimensional and dynamic. It is, therefore, open to definition and measurement in a number of ways. The social policy research community capitalised on this new opportunity to develop, expand and compare poverty research and in doing so to spread the discourse into domestic policy debates. Thus, through the 'poverty programmes' and the Observatory, the European Commission funded and stimulated research on 'social exclusion' in the member states. Michael Bauer identifies how this process of 'discourse framing' was important in redefining the issue as a European problem 'requiring a *European* policy response' (2002, 388). Thus, although the discourse originates in French social policy, it seems unlikely that the concept would simply have jumped directly across into UK discourse, without first having been brought into EU policy discourses and then spread through the

research of the European social policy community. And, it is worth stating that it is very much a European discourse: as Ruth Lister notes (2004, 76), '[T]his is a rare example in recent years of adoption by a UK government of a European rather than North American policy discourse, for the concept of social exclusion has hitherto had little purchase in the US'. The later OMC process was able to draw on this earlier phase of Europeanisation.

Policy Co-ordination in the EU to Combat Social Exclusion

In December 2000, the Nice European Council launched the open method of co-ordination on social inclusion (see Ferrera, Matsaganis and Sacchi 2002; Begg and Berghman 2002; Armstrong 2003). The process—while intended to take forward the Amsterdam Treaty provision on combating social exclusion—is not specifically provided for in the treaty. Rather, the governance methodology was modelled on the treaty-based European Employment Strategy (EES, also known as the 'Luxembourg Process') and includes agreement on common EU objectives and indicators, the adoption of National Action Plans on Inclusion (NAPincls) and periodic monitoring and review. The process is also supported through an action programme with a budget of €75 million. This programme develops the research carried out under previous action programmes but more directly oriented towards the methodology of the OMC, while also providing core funding to networks of transnational NGOs (including the European Anti-Poverty Network—EAPN).

Four common objectives for the inclusion process were agreed at Nice:

1. Facilitate participation in employment and access by all to resources, rights, goods and services.
2. Prevent the risk of exclusion.
3. Help the most vulnerable.
4. Mobilise all relevant bodies.

Member states' strategies implementing these broad objectives are reported in their NAPincls and are subject to processes of peer review. Since 2000, two full cycles of NAPincls have been prepared by member states—2001–2003 and 2003–2005—with an updating 'Implementation Report' on progress under the 2003–2005 NAPincl. Following the first cycle, the objectives were (minimally) revised to identify immigrants as a particularly vulnerable group; to provide for gender mainstreaming; and to request member states to develop national targets. In 2001, agreement was reached on a set of common EU indicators (the 'Laeken indicators'—see Atkinson, Marlier and Nolan 2004) to facilitate monitoring and review of the social situation in the member states. From 2006, the process on inclusion will be 'streamlined' with other co-ordination processes on social protection (including pensions policy). Compared to other modes of EU governance and even compared to the economic and employment co-ordination processes, the social inclusion process is weakly institutionalised in the EU treaty system and is ultimately voluntary (albeit that the commitments to the aims of the process and the process itself have been endorsed at the highest level—the European Council). There are no EU-level targets and no possibilities for recommendations to be addressed to the member states either collectively or individually.

The emergence of the OMC process on social inclusion also needs to be seen in the broader context of the development of the Lisbon Strategy and its attempt to combine 'sustainable economic growth, with more and better jobs and greater social cohesion'. The social inclusion policy co-ordination process contributes the social cohesion side of the Lisbon 'triangle' and adds to the economic and employment co-ordination processes that were already under way (and on which the OMC process was modelled). The metaphor of a triangle is misleading inasmuch as the policy co-ordination processes are not merely carried out in tandem but are nested: economic policy co-ordination is carried out within the framework of the Broad Economic Policy Guidelines (BEPGs); the EES guidelines are to be consistent with the BEPGs; and inasmuch as the primary objective of social inclusion policy co-ordination is to facilitate access to employment, the success of the employment strategy in delivering jobs is paramount. Originally conceived as mutually supporting processes (connected to an idea of social policy as a productive factor), the relationship between the three sides of the Lisbon triangle, and the degree of importance attached to the social inclusion process, were redrawn following the mid-term review of the Lisbon Strategy. Inspired by the Kok High-Level Group report (Kok 2004), in 2005 the European Commission announced that the Lisbon Strategy's priorities were to be reoriented towards a central focus on 'growth and jobs' (European Commission 2005). From 2005, the BEPGs and EES Guidelines have been integrated into a single package, with member states producing integrated 'Lisbon reports'. This reprioritisation was interpreted as a downplaying of the active role of social policy, and although the importance of the social cohesion side of the Lisbon triangle was reiterated under the Luxembourg presidency in the first half of 2005, concerns remained that the commitment to social policy within the Lisbon Strategy had been weakened. The specific future of the OMC process on inclusion rests on its mid-term evaluation to be completed by the end of 2005. The article proceeds on the assumption that a co-ordination process (albeit broadened to include social protection more generally) will continue. Nonetheless, the events of 2005 indicated the potential vulnerability of the social inclusion process to shifts in the political wind.

If not all co-ordination processes are politically equal, neither do they necessarily have the same function. 'Co-ordination' is a mercurial term in the context of OMC. What different OMC processes share is that policy competence remains with the member states. Beyond this there are important differences. At one end of the spectrum, the function of co-ordination is the attempt to overcome externalities between divergent exercises of national competence. As others have noted (Notre Europe 2005), the extent of the problem may call less for co-ordination and more for greater centralisation of decision-making in EU institutions. In the absence of that centralisation, co-ordination is more hierarchical in that each member state is asked to adjust domestic policies to respond to a commonly agreed set of norms and values. Even if states do not face a specific externality, they may, nonetheless, face common problems that, consistent with subsidiarity, might be better addressed by common action. Whether by reason of an absence of competence, or because of the non-suitability of EU legislative action, the EU response is to seek to co-ordinate national action. At the other end of the spectrum, states may face different problems or may face some similar problems but with different underlying causes.

The aim of co-ordination, then, is to create a process that stimulates states to engage in national processes of problem identification, with co-ordination used by states to seek out effective solutions to their problems. The difficulty here might be in justifying on subsidiarity grounds this sort of co-ordination within a European framework. If economic policy co-ordination tends towards the former end of the spectrum then social inclusion co-ordination lies towards the latter end with the result that the inclusion OMC process is both more 'open' and contestable.

As will be suggested in Part II, these differences across OMC processes make it difficult to talk generally about the Europeanisation effect of OMC. Indeed, it requires us to be sensitive to the differences and similarities within and across different modes of EU governance. But, more importantly, the types and trajectory of forces and stimuli emerging from OMC are not enough to explain domestic adaptation. Rather, we need to bring into view the role of *national* institutions in converting such forces into adaptation pressures.

Part II: The Europeanisation of Domestic Policy-Making

Use of the concept of 'Europeanisation' as an analytical device is not without its difficulties. As the literature acknowledges, the idea of Europeanisation has 'many faces' (Olsen 2001) and the concept can be explored across numerous dimensions (see also Featherstone 2003). As Claudio Radaelli indicates (2003), there is 'the risk of conceptual stretching' to the point where the Europeanisation concept becomes analytically too indeterminate to be useful. In particular, there is a tension between the desire for a parsimonious analysis of the phenomenon of domestic change and the need to relate this to the evolving process of European integration and EU governance from which forces for change emanate (see Börzel 2005). As will be seen, the very nature of the OMC process lends itself to analysis not only of what is 'received' by member states, but also what states seek to 'project' into EU governance. Accordingly, the analysis of domestic adaptation to OMC will include both these dimensions.

The intention of OMC is little other than Europeanisation; however, isolating the causal connection between domestic policy change and the impact of OMC is far from straightforward (see Zeitlin 2005). Indeed, we need to distinguish between adapting to OMC and the consequential impact of OMC upon domestic policy. As regards the former, what is at stake is domestic adaptation to the OMC technique itself. It refers to the very possibility of governance through OMC. This includes the extent to which the national system is prepared to open out to, and engage with, the different elements of the OMC methodology. A set of research questions can, therefore, be generated in terms of domestic adaptation to the preparation of National Action Plans; the use of common objectives, indicators and targets (where appropriate); the production of recommendations (in the economic and employment spheres); the mechanisms for peer review and evaluation. The empirical study of the UK in Part III of this article focuses on the UK's response to the NAPincl and to the setting of common objectives and indicators for social inclusion.

As Simon Bulmer and Martin Burch note (forthcoming), domestic adaptation involves analysis of mechanisms not only for the 'reception' of EU governance but

also for the 'projection' of domestic priorities, preferences and aspirations into EU policy-making processes. This takes on a somewhat different slant in the context of OMC. As a new 'open' technique of governance, the OMC may create new opportunities to project or input norms, values, policy paradigms, policy solutions and policy techniques to be circulated via the OMC. Moreover, because of the very openness of the technique itself (especially in areas where the technique is non-treaty based), opportunities may also be created to alter the specific OMC methodology operating in a given area or to influence the significance which a member state attaches to the technique as a whole within the EU governance repertoire. To use Tanja Börzel's terminology, OMC creates possibilities for 'uploading' as well as for 'downloading' (2002) and analysis of domestic adaptation needs to consider (and relate) both dimensions.

These research questions are more preoccupied with changes to what might be termed 'second order' or 'meta orders' of governance. The effect of changes at these levels to domestic policies in the areas affected by OMC—the first-order effects—is harder to trace. Accordingly, the focus of the analysis presented here is largely on the UK response to OMC as a new governance technique.

Europeanisation and Different Modes of Governance

We might expect different governance techniques to produce different adaptation pressures and responses. So, what then should we expect of OMC? Simon Bulmer and Stephen Padgett (2004) hypothesise about the impact of different modes of governance on the likelihood of 'policy transfer'. Starting from the premise that the literature has overemphasised voluntary forms of policy transfer (which they consider to be typified in studies of OMC), they seek to broaden the debate by examining the impact of more coercive modes of governance. Or rather, they distinguish between three categorisations of governance:

- Governance by negotiation.
- Governance by hierarchy.
- Governance by facilitated unilateralism or facilitated co-ordination.

For present purposes, what is important is the distinction between governance by facilitated co-ordination and governance by hierarchy. For Bulmer and Padgett, their 'general hypothesis is that hierarchy will generate the strongest form of policy transfer' with facilitated co-ordination producing 'a diffuse form of mutual *influence* between states, or in the worst case, *abortive* transfer' (2004, 106). While intuitively this looks like an appealing hypothesis (and indeed there may be evidence to support it), the analytical framework itself is problematic for three main reasons.

First, it seeks to explain the extent of policy transfer (the dependent variable) in terms of the level of institutionalisation at EU level (the independent variable), as evidenced by a central role for EU institutions and for the coercive force of law. As such it does not appear to give a central explanatory role to domestic institutions in mediating between pressure for change and policy outcome. This is paradoxical given that Bulmer and Radaelli subsequently use the same framework to analyse the Europeanisation of national policy (2005) in ways which acknowledge that pressures emanating from EU governance mechanisms alone are insufficient

explanations of policy outcomes and which concede that the boundaries between independent and dependent variables are blurred. Accordingly, any attempt to relate policy outcomes to the nature of the mode of EU governance must also account for the role of domestic institutions in mediating forces generated by EU governance.

Secondly, we need to consider how useful the general categories of governance are in generating workable hypotheses. For one thing, the different categorisations often tend to collapse into specific examples of techniques or modes of governance (i.e. the Community Method is the example of governance by hierarchy while the Open Method is the example of facilitated governance). As explained below, this leads to a problematic failure to see similarities and differences within and across the different categories identified. But, inasmuch as there is an attempt to define governance by hierarchy abstractly, what appear to count are a central role of EU institutions and the coercive force of law. This is juxtaposed against a somewhat encompassing category of facilitated governance (characterised by persuasion, soft incentives and horizontal exchange). However, this sort of juxtaposition may end up being unhelpful in downplaying the role of EU institutions outside the category of governance by hierarchy and in its caricature of the nature of law (relegated to an Austinian model of the legitimate exercise of sovereign power).

The role played by supranational institutions is undoubtedly different in OMC than in the Community Method. The European Court of Justice and European Parliament are largely absent from OMC and the Commission's role as stimulator of domestic policy reflection is not the same as its role in exercising its right of legislative initiative or its executive or enforcement functions. But, that is not to say that institutional structures at EU level are unimportant. The European Council performs an overarching steering and organising role, although most of the work is prepared by the Council of Ministers. The work of the Council of Ministers is highly influenced by a new breed of committees—the Economic Policy Committee, the Employment Committee and Social Protection Committee—composed of high-level civil servants and through which consensus is sought. The relationship between these committees and the European Commission is crucial in defining the scope and ambition of co-ordination processes. Eurostat is important in mapping the statistical performance of member states in respect of agreed social and economic indicators. There are, therefore, top-down pressures emanating from the EU institutional and governance apparatus that are attempting to steer national systems.

As regards the role of law, the idea that law equates with coercion and with strong pressures for domestic change is not uncommon. For instance, Johan Olsen (2001), drawing on the work of Kerstin Jacobsson (2001), views the impact of Europeanisation on domestic systems as more likely 'the more precise their legal foundation' and when 'based on hard law rather than soft law'. Nonetheless, we need to avoid seeing law as nothing other than a medium of legitimate force. Law may be more or less prescriptive. Whatever the attempted level of prescription it is always open to interpretation. Law may be more procedural than substantive, providing means for the organisation of problem solving as much as commanding a particular solution. And law—especially law that emanates from one legal system

but which seeks to influence another—is open to evasion, contestation and 'irritation'. None of which is to deny the importance of EU law. Rather, the point is that the simple equation of law with coercion gives a rather formalistic view of law while, at the same time, it downplays the manner in which other modes of governing can be used to exert coercion and persuasion.

A third and more concrete problem with the Bulmer and Padgett framework rests with the attribution of specific techniques or modes of governance to the general categorisations of hierarchy and facilitated co-ordination. As Bulmer and Padgett admit, there are different techniques or modes of governance subsumed within each category of governance. However, they downplay the enormous difference between the different techniques of governance *within* each categorisation, while overplaying the difference *between* techniques assigned to each category. In this way, the coercive power of the Community Method is juxtaposed to the weak persuasion of the OMC.

The focus on the general category of governance rather than the specific mode or technique is more particularly problematic because there are aspects of OMC that are not dissimilar to the Community Method. For example, even coercive techniques such as adoption of directives or mutual recognition often require national administrators to seek to co-operate with, and learn from, administrators in other national systems in processes of mutual and collective problem solving (especially in the face of uncertainty and imperfect knowledge: see, e.g., Scott and Holder's discussion of EU environmental directives (forthcoming)). Moreover, directives can contain objectives as well as prescriptions and may require to be supplemented by non-legal codes of guidance or interpretation while OMC might be used to evaluate or support EU legislation. To put it at its bluntest, a framework directive that relies upon intensive elaboration and co-operation between EU and national administrators has more in common with a highly prescriptive OMC process than it does a regulation. Moreover, across time, there has been a trend away from command and control regulation to the use of less prescriptive and more framework laws (not least because of subsidiary concerns). If 'hard law' is not necessarily as hard as it seems, equally, 'soft' techniques may display important divergences, as was noted in Part I. The sort of bottom-up, multilateral and open approach of the OMC on social inclusion differs from the more top-down, bilateral steering approaches that have tended to characterise the economic and employment co-ordination processes.

Insofar as different modes of governance cannot be easily isolated within broad categories and insofar as within a mode of governance (whether Community Method or Open Method) we find important variations, it becomes difficult to hypothesise about the policy outcome effects of different categories of governance. Both across and within different governance techniques, forces of different type and trajectory will be generated and the role played by law and EU institutions will vary somewhat in producing such forces. The magnitude of the force and its impact on the domestic system, however, depends on how those systems convert forces into adaptation pressures. This allows both for *potentially* strong coercive forces to be dissipated as well as for *potentially* weak persuasive forces to be amplified. Bulmer and Padgett themselves are clear to conclude that testing their hypoth-

esised link between institutionalisation at EU level and policy transfer through facilitated governance proves to be unsatisfactory. This is perhaps more understandable in light of the critique advanced above. The focus of this analysis is, therefore, on the intermediate step of domestic adaptation to OMC. It aims to be sensitive to forces with different characteristics, but explores the mediation of these forces by domestic structures and agents and the conversion of forces into adaptation pressures within the national system.

Adapting to OMC—the Analytical Framework

Following the general approach identified in the literature, the analysis of British adaptation to the OMC on social inclusion operates along three dimensions: (1) examining its impact on the polity, politics and policies of a member state (see Börzel and Risse 2003; Börzel 2005); (2) conceptualisation of how the domestic system responds to EU forces in terms of the taxonomies used by Radaelli (2003) and Börzel (2005) of 'inertia', 'absorption', 'accommodation', 'transformation' and 'retrenchment'; and (3) explanations for why adaptation occurs in terms of the presence of institutional veto points or constraints in the domestic system, exercise of leadership, timing, redistribution of resources and opportunities for domestic actors and 'goodness' of fit between the EU and domestic systems (see Radaelli 2003; Börzel and Risse 2003).

The taxonomies of how change does (or does not) occur require a little elaboration. One possibility is that there is no domestic change. This may be due to 'inertia' where there is simply no response, or no capacity to respond to the force, or due to 'retrenchment'. We need, though, to distinguish retrenchment as negative 'defiance' or 'contestation' from what Jelle Visser (2005) refers to as 'amplification', in which the member state positively uses EU frames or discourses to reinforce domestic structures or domestic policy choices (particularly relevant to OMC), but without actually adapting those structures in response to EU forces. The other possibility is that there is domestic change. This may be through 'absorption' or 'accommodation' in which existing structures, processes and policies change to greater or lesser extents but without fundamental alteration to the core architecture, norms or values of the domestic system. Or, there may be 'transformation' of the domestic system characterised by new actors, structures, procedures, techniques, policies or values. These responses may also be selective and they may be conditional (leaving open the possibility of future defiance or contestation). In the context of OMC, it is also important to note that the domestic response is not a one-shot game but rather an ongoing and repeated interaction and so we need to be sensitive to changes not just at one point in time but across time.

The domestic system may also respond by projecting back forces into EU governance. One could bracket this off as really more a question of seeking to explain EU policy-making in terms of domestic institutionalisation (as the independent variable) and so beyond the scope of an inquiry into Europeanisation per se. However, this is more difficult to sustain in the context of OMC given the cyclical and repeated phases of EU objective setting, national reporting, monitoring and evaluation. The extent to which any state faces adaptation pressures arising from

OMC over time is a function of how well it and others are capable of influencing the shape and content of future cycles of the process. This ability to seek to expand or constrain, focus or diffuse OMC processes—features that are related to the degree of institutionalisation of OMC within EU governance—cannot be easily bracketed off when analysing the domestic impact of OMC.

As regards why change occurs, explanations differ in their emphasis upon structure or agency and the enabling or constraining effect of domestic political structures. The approach adopted here does not favour one explanation over another and the analysis suggests a variety of interpretations and dynamics at work. Importantly, as Bulmer and Burch (forthcoming) suggest, it is necessary also to account for changes in domestic structures (unrelated to European influences) but which condition the possibility of responding to pressures from the EU. In the context of the UK, the changing constitutional order and the reframing of the boundaries of governance post-devolution are particularly important to understanding British adaptation to the EU social inclusion OMC.

Part III: UK Adaptation to the OMC on Social Inclusion

The existing empirical evidence concerning the domestic impact of OMC processes in EU countries often draws implicitly on analyses associated with the Europeanisation literature (see the studies in Zeitlin and Pochet 2005). Here, and drawing on my own empirical work in this area (Armstrong 2005), I seek to bring that analysis to the foreground in examining the UK's adaptation to the OMC on social inclusion. The analysis proceeds in four sections. The first deals with the response of central government to the need to produce the NAPincl. The second examines the impact of devolution on the UK's response. The third section looks to the response from other actors, particularly NGOs. The fourth section explores whether OMC triggers processes of domestic problem identification.

Adaptation by Central Government

Despite the absence of any legal requirement to do so, the sense that NAPincls are required by Europe imbues their production with a quasi-obligatory status: like other member states, the UK has produced the NAPincls required under the OMC process. Responsibility for preparing the UK NAPincl rests with the Department of Work and Pensions (DWP). DWP also has responsibility for the annual *Opportunity for All* (OFA) report to parliament on central government strategies to tackle poverty and social exclusion.² DWP's initial approach to the first NAPincl was to base it more or less on the OFA report. In terms of timing, having launched OFA in 1999, the UK was not about to reinvent the wheel for the NAPincl. But, more importantly, in the short time period given to states to submit the first NAPincl, it was easier to accommodate the NAPincl by mainly switching the content of OFA into the NAPincl.

The second NAPincl was intended to be different from the first. Post-devolution, the NAPincl afforded a timely opportunity for central and devolved government in the UK to present in one 'plan' their strategies and policies for tackling social

exclusion. Preparing the NAPincl created the possibility for closer working relations between DWP and the devolved administrations on issues relating to poverty and social exclusion (discussed further below). A functional difference between OFA and NAPincl identified in the second NAPincl is that the latter is also intended to allow for comparison with other countries. Indeed, UK government has tended to stress the multilateral conception of OMC with its emphasis on comparing best practices and learning. In process terms, the NAPincl created an opportunity to develop a more participative approach to building the NAPincl (discussed further below).

The domestic political system, of course, exerts its own constraints. However, as Bulmer and Burch (forthcoming) have suggested, the UK system tends to have fewer institutional constraints on domestic change. An important constraint on civil servants within DWP comes from ministers. Within DWP there have been numerous changes in the ministerial team. But, while this has had an effect on DWP's production of OFA, the NAPincl has been said to slip below the ministerial radar. Given that the format of the NAPincl is dictated very much by the approach agreed at EU level, this European 'constraint' gives national civil servants some more leverage and autonomy in resisting attempts by ministers to 'spin' the NAPincl.

Another potential source of constraint would be parliamentary scrutiny. However, there is no evidence that either the relevant Commons or Lords committees have engaged in any detailed scrutiny of the OMC process on inclusion. Indeed, we can contrast this with the scrutiny of the proposed OMC on healthcare. Both the European Scrutiny Committee of the Commons and the more recently established Lords European Sub-Committee on Social Policy and Consumer Affairs have taken a keen interest in the Commission's Communication on the proposed OMC in healthcare. In evidence and correspondence, ministers have been keen to play up the 'light touch' approach of the exchange of information within OMC and to deny perceptions that the process will be dominated by indicators: something that the Lords sub-committee has treated with a certain suspicion.³ These are by no means hard constraints, but it is noteworthy that not even this level of scrutiny attached to the inclusion process as it was being developed.

In 2003, the European Commission published a 'streamlining' communication (European Commission 2003) proposing an integrated social inclusion and social protection OMC (to include issues of pensions and healthcare) with common objectives and an integrated reporting mechanism. The UK's response within the Social Protection Committee (SPC) was to argue in favour of retention of the distinct NAPincls, pointing to the development of its more participative approach to the NAPincl, and the increased domestic visibility it gave to social inclusion issues. The experience of domestic adaptation to the NAPincls prompted DWP to seek to maintain the NAPincl within the OMC architecture. The OMC process has given DWP a pivotal role not only as regards the reception of OMC (in terms of preparing the NAPincl), but also through its representatives on the SPC to project into EU governance. It is worth noting that the new committees that support the OMC processes stand somewhat outside the traditional structures of COREPER, and give them (and the ministries represented within them) some autonomy.

The issue of streamlining came back to the fore in 2005 with the relaunch of the Lisbon Strategy. For the proponents of the NAPincl within DWP, there is still a reluctance to fold the NAPincl into a broader social protection report (although there is perhaps more sympathy for this on the pensions side). As to the relationship to the new integrated national Lisbon reports, while keen to keep social cohesion as part of the Lisbon triangle there is, nonetheless, a desire within DWP to keep the NAPincl distinct from the Lisbon reports. As the Treasury (which is responsible for producing the UK's 'National Reform Programme') has indicated its unwillingness to open out the Lisbon reports to the input of civil society (the argument being that these are 'reports' of policy which have already been subject to consultation), maintaining the NAPincl is, therefore, important to consolidating the new working relationships that DWP has sought to create.

In sum, it is evident that actors within DWP have viewed the process of preparing the NAPincls as an opportunity to break out of traditional bureaucratic routines. There have been few domestic institutional constraints on DWP action within the OMC framework while, at the same time, the architecture of OMC (including the SPC) has somewhat enhanced the autonomy of civil servants.

Devolution and the 'National' Action Plan

Responsibilities for European policy-making, employment policy and for tax and benefits policies remain 'reserved' to Westminster, while responsibility for social inclusion strategies has been devolved to the sub-state level. However, devolution does not result in an easy compartmentalisation of functions into *either* reserved *or* devolved categories, and the NAPincl has created an opportunity for talking across boundaries. Nonetheless, beyond a desire for input and representation within the NAPincl, it is not apparent that the devolved administrations have seen any particular strategic interest in using the NAPincl process. For these newly created institutions the key strategies on social inclusion were not to be found from the OMC process but more directly from the specific strategies and policies put in place post-devolution. Both Scotland and Wales had developed new strategic frameworks for social inclusion. In this way, the response from these administrations was a basic 'accommodation' of the request to feed information into DWP combined with some 'retrenchment' in the sense of a concern that a focus on the 'national' action plan might result in a dilution of the 'sub-national' policy initiatives. The situation for Northern Ireland has not been quite the same as for Scotland and Wales. Pre-devolution, the UK government developed *New Targeting Social Need* (New TSN) as the framework for social inclusion in Northern Ireland. Post-devolution, New TSN was transferred to the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister (OFMDFM), and a review of its effectiveness was initiated amid widespread criticism that New TSN did not amount to a clear regional strategy along the lines being developed in the rest of the UK. Suspension of the devolved institutions made it difficult for the process to move beyond the evaluation into a phase of reform. However, in April 2004, the secretary of state for Northern Ireland announced a consultation process on a Northern Ireland Anti-Poverty Strategy. Of interest here was the proposal that the format of this new regional strategy be consistent with the NAPincl both in terms of the common objectives for such plans and the use of

the Laeken indicators. That said, there has been criticism that the reporting structure of the OMC has done little to recognise the relationship between social exclusion and conflict in Northern Ireland (Hillyard, Rolston and Tomlinson 2005, 168). A further round of consultation was launched in 2005.

In short, whereas devolved administrations in Scotland and Wales have not seen engagement with the NAPincl as creating any new opportunities for policy development, in Northern Ireland one can see a more strategic interest in the model of the OMC process to inform and transform a domestic policy framework that had been subject to criticism.

As is clear, preparation of the NAPincl is concentrated within central government. Institutional adaptation has not been through creation of new institutional structures, but rather adapting existing lines of communication between civil servants, including those working in the devolved administrations. It is noteworthy that post-devolution, new structures—Joint Ministerial Committees—were set up to handle issues and potential problems between central and devolved government (including one on Poverty—JMC(P)—chaired by the chancellor). Nonetheless, these soon fell into abeyance and certainly JMC(P) played no role in co-ordinating devolved input into the NAPincl. Accordingly, central government acts as a gatekeeper, both upstream in dealings with the EU through the SPC and downstream in co-ordinating devolved input into the NAPincl.

The Role of Social NGOs

The most obvious indication of domestic adaptation to the inclusion OMC rests with the development of a participative approach to the NAPincl. It is important to make clear at the outset that this participative approach refers to the process of producing the NAPincl rather than a participative style of policy-making per se: it is about adapting a process to a process (the reporting mechanism under the OMC). The aim here is simply to explore this mobilisation rather than to suggest its wider impact on policy. Elsewhere I have described in detail NGO engagement in the NAPincl (Armstrong 2005). Here I focus particularly on sub-state NGO mobilisation around the 2003–2005 NAPincl and the desire to expand out (and to some extent institutionalise) participation in future NAPincl exercises.

As one interviewee described it, without ‘the driving force from Europe’ to work with civil society and other actors, it was unlikely that the DWP would have developed a willingness to engage with social NGOs. Interviewees tended to talk in terms of a transformation of institutional culture within DWP and, indeed, NGOs reported that hitherto they had not been able to find a way in to influence OFA. The specific Nice Objective to ‘mobilise all relevant actors’ and the perceived criticism in the first Joint Inclusion Report of the limited engagement of civil society actors have created resources for NGOs to seek to influence the NAPincl. Significantly, it is not just NGO mobilisation, but the response of civil servants within DWP that has been striking in creating a more participative approach (see above). The NAPincl has redistributed the opportunities both for civil servants and for civil society to engage in dialogue on issues of poverty and social exclusion.

It is important to note that the engagement of domestic NGOs (unlike transnational groups) is not directly funded through the EU Action Programme that supports the EU inclusion process. Indeed, UK sub-state NGOs have been heavily reliant on funds from the National Lottery to support their activities. This has meant that groups like the Anti-Poverty Network Cymru (APNC) and EAPN England have operated on a voluntary basis with no core funding. The Northern Ireland Anti-Poverty Network (NIAPN) and the Scottish Poverty Alliance have had somewhat more stable funding. Nevertheless, the UK and devolved focus of the NAPincl has created the opportunity for sub-state NGOs to organise and to participate in the NAP-building process. This has entailed organisation of awareness-raising seminars about the NAPincls among members of the sub-national networks, but also advocacy activities in the form of submissions to DWP on the form and content of the 2003–2005 NAPincl.

Although domestic factors are important in shaping NGO mobilisation around EU processes (see Cram 2001), that sub-state anti-poverty networks in the UK are also collectively represented in the transnational EAPN is also of some significance. As a transnational body, EAPN has an overview of the OMC process as a whole and its place in EU social policy. It can seek to influence the overall architecture of the OMC process. For domestic NGOs the priority is primarily in mobilising around the NAPincl, but through their connections with EAPN, national members are able to draw on the knowledge and experience of the transnational group (while in turn, the knowledge derived from members of EAPN feeds into its lobbying strategy). In other words, not only has the NAPincl created an opportunity and resource for sub-state mobilisation, the association with an EU-funded transnational NGO has created opportunities and resources through which to enhance that mobilisation.

Particularly when we look at sub-state NGOs it is noteworthy that—consistent with what has already been said—they have looked to influence the DWP directly. To that extent they have not necessarily looked to the devolved administrations themselves to feed in their views but rather have gone direct to the institutional home of the NAPincl. That is not to say that sub-state NGOs have not sought to develop good working relations with devolved administrations either for purely domestic matters or in terms of seeking their involvement in NAPincl awareness-raising seminars. Indeed, there is evidence from Scotland that the Poverty Alliance's expertise in respect of the NAPincl and European policy developments (as indicated by DWP's willingness to engage them in dialogue) has been helpful in securing funding but also status for the organisation in its relations with the Scottish Executive. This suggests a potentially wider impact of mobilisation around the NAPincl on relations between sub-state NGOs and devolved government.

Perhaps the most important innovation has been the creation of the Social Policy Task Force (SPTF) with the specific goal of influencing the process and content of the NAPincl. As well as bringing together the sub-state networks, SPTF also includes OXFAM GB and ATD Fourth World (both of whom made individual submissions to DWP on the 2003–2005 NAPincl). The SPTF has co-ordinated seminars intended to spread awareness of the NAPincl process to grass-roots organisations. The SPTF also produced a submission to DWP drawing responses collated from

grass-roots organisations obtained at the awareness-raising seminars. These responses had a direct impact on the 2nd UK NAPincl in the sense that this part of the SPTF submission is reported directly as Annex E of the NAPincl entitled 'What People with Experience of Poverty Have Said'.

Out of the working relationship between DWP and the SPTF came a Participation Working Group with the aim being to feed the views of those experiencing poverty into the NAP-building process. To what extent this was able to give voice to more than a limited number of individuals it is hard to say but what is significant was the intention to increase the involvement of those experiencing poverty in preparing future NAPincls. A Participation Working Group Plan was agreed in April 2003, with the aim of:

enabling people in poverty to participate in the development of the UK NAP 2005 and beyond by establishing a real partnership between people living in poverty (women, men, children from all backgrounds) and government at all levels in order to improve anti-poverty policy and practice described in the NAP.

The plan was annexed to the NAPincl 2003–2005.

Out of this work developed the idea for creating a participation tool-kit to help community groups to engage with the NAPincl process in the future. Although the EU Action Programme does not provide core funding for national networks it does, however, fund awareness-raising projects. Oxfam GB was successful in obtaining funds under the programme to support the development of the participation tool-kit. Using the expertise of members of the SPTF and with the support of DWP, the 'Get Heard' tool-kit was launched in October 2004. The funding supports a co-ordinator employed by Oxfam, and facilitates holding community-based workshops. In combination with awareness-raising sessions, these workshops will form the main focus of activities leading up to the preparation of the next NAPincl. One interviewee noted that, as a consequence of this work, the organisation had also been able to make contacts with community groups with which it had previously little involvement, again suggesting a broader spillover effect from the European process itself.

It is important to make clear that it is the presence of the NAPincl that has been so significant in creating new opportunities for NGO advocacy and influence, rather than the overall architecture of the OMC. Indeed, as will be suggested in the following section, it is perhaps the dialogic process of participation around the NAPincl rather than the signals and steers from the common objectives and indicators that has been useful in stimulating domestic problem recognition. For NGOs the hope is that these new working relations will spill over from the NAPincl to domestic policy-making. There is also a desire to spread the approach around other government departments. However, the somewhat cool attitude of the Treasury towards NGO involvement in the domestic Lisbon programmes and the concerns surrounding the future of the 'mobilisation' objective within a streamlined OMC on social inclusion and social protection indicate that the battle may be more one of maintaining what has been achieved and less one of expanding the scope of NGO engagement beyond the NAPincl.

Identifying Problems through OMC

The effectiveness of OMC rests on its ability to stimulate states to engage in processes of problem identification. Of course, states may choose not to act, or politically may be unable or unwilling to act, even if problems are identified. Nonetheless, problem identification constitutes an important aim of OMC. Different aspects of the OMC methodology may motivate reflection upon domestic policy. For instance, debates surrounding the content of the NAPincl may be useful in putting issues on to the agenda of domestic policy-makers. Interviewees (both within DWP and within NGOs) identified the area of 'financial exclusion' as having achieved greater policy recognition as a consequence of dialogue around the 2003–2005 NAPincl and subsequently the DWP worked with the Department for Trade and Industry (DTI) in developing an 'Action Plan' on over-indebtedness. An interviewee remarked that this took on a more 'social inclusion' dimension than might have been the case had the DTI approached the issue from a purely banking or financial services perspective.

Nonetheless, it is far less clear that other elements of the OMC methodology, especially the common EU indicators and objectives, are stimulating policy reflection. In the UK, domestic policy objectives and targets are set in Public Service Agreements (PSAs) agreed as part of the Spending Review process. In one sense, the UK's governance apparatus—the use of objectives, indicators and targets linked to budgeting processes—is something to which the OMC aspires. It might be thought then that the level of 'fit' in approach would make the UK somewhat more open to OMC and more susceptible to forces being converted into adaptation pressures. However, the domestic and EU cycles are not synchronised. The result is that domestic priorities, targets and indicators are set in advance of EU co-ordination processes. This limits the ability of the UK to absorb and accommodate policy steers through OMC. The NAPincl 2003–2005 clearly states that:

Priorities for the period of this NAP must be set within the context of the domestic objectives set at all levels of government. This might include the time necessary for consultation, or existing budgetary or spending review cycles. These may not coincide with the timeframe of this NAP.

Consequently, national 'plans' tend to 'report' what has already been set in place domestically.

An Annex to the 2003–2005 NAPincl details UK performance in respect of the common Laeken indicators but, for the most part, the narrative elements of the NAPincl look to domestic indicators (in part because these are often used for domestic objectives and targets) (see Mabbett 2004). In respect of one indicator—low income anchored at a baseline and up-rated in line with inflation—domestic data are used directly to contest the picture presented by EU data. Thus, the information derived from the common EU indicators is not always as timely or accurate as domestic data. In fairness, there is a need to read across both sets of indicators and data to obtain an overall picture and to that extent the EU indicators allow for the national position to be open to more comparative scrutiny. However, it is evident that domestic indicators and data do compete with EU indicators and data in framing the identification of domestic problems.

One adaptation that can be reported is with regard to the low-income components of the UK's new child poverty indicator. It will use the EU's preferred OECD modified equivalence scale rather than the McClement's scale, which will allow for EU comparison and benchmarking. The result of this change is both to increase the number of children regarded as being in poverty but, at the same time, it is intended to be more sensitive to the impact of tax credits. It should be recalled that one of the central pledges of the prime minister has been to end child poverty within a generation and the target (and indicators) form part of the PSA between Treasury and DWP. To some extent, then, we can point to European influences transforming the measurement of child poverty.

It is not obvious, however, that the general EU objectives for social inclusion—aside from the objective to mobilise actors—are sufficiently precise or different from domestic policy priorities to produce an adaptation pressure. The principal common objective is to 'facilitate participation in employment and access by all to resources, rights, goods and services'. The UK response to this is to reiterate that for most people of working age, a job is the best route out of poverty. The emphasis is then on active labour market policies and making work pay. More specifically this translates into the New Deal programmes, the introduction of a minimum wage and the use of tax credits. While the NAPincl affords an opportunity to highlight these initiatives, the EU process does not drive them. Rather, with UK employment rates above the EU target under the EES, performance in respect of facilitating employment affords the UK an opportunity to evangelise about macroeconomic growth and stability, and the flexibility of its labour markets (which the UK would like to see other EU states emulate), rather than identifying a problem to which the UK needs to respond.

That said, the NAPincl does identify certain problem areas. Economic inactivity among working-age adults on incapacity benefits is highlighted as a particular problem (and plans to reform incapacity benefits were announced by the government in 2005), as is the number of lone parents (and their children), ethnic minorities and older people living in jobless households. Nonetheless, this serves not to raise questions about the adequacy of social protection for the economically inactive, but instead to reinforce the role of active labour market policies as the solution. Thus, the NAPincl uses comparisons with other EU countries to show that the risk of poverty among employed persons is the same or less in the UK. Even if it could be said that the OMC process had helped in problem identification, the European framework serves to amplify and reinforce the centrality of existing policy solutions in terms of active labour market policies.

As regards the objective of 'access to resources, rights, goods and services', it is worth stating that the language of rights tends to be absent from Labour's social policy discourse, with the emphasis instead being on the responsibility of individuals to take up opportunities. Thus, the UK NAPincl frames its response to this objective in terms of a

fundamental overhaul of the welfare system, transforming it from a passive benefits payment machine to an active system that tackles poverty, creates opportunity, and helps people become self-sufficient and independent.

Absence of opportunity, discrimination and inequality are identified in the NAPincl as being at the root of social exclusion, but it is the opportunity to take up paid employment that is really key to government policy, as the UK makes clear in its October 2005 Lisbon 'National Reform Programme'⁴ (the first under the revised Lisbon Strategy):

The UK's radical welfare reform agenda aims to deliver a welfare state which supports individuals in maximising their opportunities throughout the life-cycle. This has involved a move away from a culture of welfare dependency towards a welfare state which enables and encourages people to participate in the labour market and in society more widely.

Again, the impact of EU objectives is more in terms of its use by government to amplify its modernisation programme. The adequacy of the welfare system for those outside the labour market, the implications of a failure to achieve full employment and the wider issue of increasing societal inequality are not problematised.

The difficulty is perhaps that underneath the common discourse of social exclusion lie different political philosophies and traditions across the member states (see Levitas 1998; Lister 2004). As a consequence the broad and encompassing conceptualisation of social exclusion as a multidimensional phenomenon has translated into a much narrower set of common political discourses concerning increasing employment rates and modernising social protection. Beyond the common consensus on the importance of employment to tackling poverty and social exclusion, there is disagreement on the relative roles of the individual, the state and the market in tackling social exclusion and whether greater societal equality should be an explicit objective of policy. It is the absence of a common conceptualisation of social exclusion that in part explains the emergence of OMC in the area, but that also increases the likelihood that different national systems will interpret and select the signals and steers from OMC in different ways, albeit within the context of an EU governance framework. As Ruth Levitas suggests (1998, 22), the result is not a pan-European discourse founded on consensus, but different national interpretations that are contested within the European framework, making it more likely that states will compete to use the OMC to 'upload' their own social visions.

In this way the flexibility of the meaning to be attributed to the common EU social inclusion objectives is a micro-level example of the contestation over the so-called European Social Model. As Daniel Wincott argues (2003), the idea of a European Social Model (and its modernisation) re-emerged with the launch of the Lisbon Strategy. But, OMC is not a means for 'downloading' a model with a settled core meaning. 'Goodness of fit' explanations for Europeanisation are of little utility here given that the (European Social) 'model' to which member states are responding is both abstract and contested. Domestic adaptation is more likely to be characterised in terms of selection of European frames through which to amplify or legitimate domestic reform strategies or, as suggested above, to upload competing values (or competing interpretations of common values) and models into the European system through OMC. And, certainly, the UK's commitment to Lisbon and to OMC

rests on its sense of acting as a 'policy entrepreneur' (to adapt Börzel and Risse's 'norm entrepreneur' explanation for Europeanisation (2003)). OMC creates the opportunity for projection and evangelising, perhaps more so than for learning and adaptation.

Conclusions

Writing in this journal, Claire Annesley remarked that UK social policy under New Labour has been both Americanised and Europeanised; whereas the American influences have been assumed on a voluntary basis, the European influence is 'obligatory' arising from the corpus of EU social law and policy (Annesley 2003). The aim of this article has been to consider a less 'obligatory' form of Europeanisation in the guise of OMC. While the focus of the article has been on British adaptation to this new European process, the issue of the Americanisation of welfare policy is far from irrelevant because, for some, the danger of OMC is that a state like the UK will seek to use it to export or 'upload' its (allegedly American-influenced) social model, which may then be 'downloaded' in other member states. Indeed, the idea that Europeanisation *is* Americanisation is one of the fears that prompted the 'no' vote to the European Constitution in France. What is clear among all the political rhetoric is that the rejection of the Constitutional Treaty, together with the debates surrounding the mid-term review of the Lisbon Strategy, has put the issue of the nature of the European Social Model on the political agenda. Where combating social exclusion through EU co-ordination fits within that model will have become clearer by the end of 2005 as the evaluation of the OMC process is completed. What is important, though, is that the debate is taking place: the issues are on the table and—more so than the abstract debate within the Constitutional Convention—so too are the contested values and visions of Europe's social future.

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Notes

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1. Resolution of the Council and of the ministers for social affairs meeting within the Council of 29 September 1989 on combating social exclusion: OJ C277 (31.10.89), p. 1.
2. The UK NAPincls and the OFA reports can be accessed at www.dwp.gov.uk/ofa.
3. *House of Lords European Select Committee, Fourth Report, 2005–2006*.
4. Available at www.hm-treasury.gov.uk.

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