

Book Review

Stephen Wall (2008)

A Stranger in Europe: Britain and the EU from Thatcher to Blair

Oxford: Oxford University Press

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Beginning in 1982 with arguments over the British contribution to the EC budget and ending in 2004 with the negotiation of the EU constitutional Treaty, *A Stranger in Europe* describes and analyses the substantive and political problems in ‘wrestling’ with the institutional changes implied by Treaty Reform from the Single European Act (SEA) onwards. It seeks to ‘paint a picture’ of the issues affecting UK prime ministers and their French or German counterparts and, subsequently, account for why they took certain decisions. In the preface, Wall states clearly what the book is not: an extensive political history, an exhaustive story of civil service life, or a juicy blow-by-blow account as others have dared write. Despite some of the constraints imposed by the Official Secrets Act, the book is, nonetheless, a highly personal, ‘worm’s eye view’ of politics, negotiation and decision-making inside government, drawing on 35 years inside the British Diplomatic Service.

There can be few more qualified to trace the development of the UK’s position in Europe, for Wall is certainly no stranger to it. From 1983 onwards, he filled numerous posts, including five years at the European Communities Department of the Foreign Office and five years as the UK’s Permanent Representative to the EU, interspersed with roles as private secretary to several foreign secretaries (Howe, Major, Hurd) and ambassador to Portugal. Overall, Wall spent 10 years as Private Secretary. Until 2004 he headed up the European Secretariat of the Cabinet Office, acting as Tony Blair’s senior adviser on the EU.

Wall was encouraged to write the book by Professor Anand Menon of the University of Birmingham, and given access by the Foreign and Commonwealth Office to documents of the period. The title mirrors *A Stranger in Spain*, written in the 1950s by H. V. Morton. The chapter titles, from ‘The Start of a Trouble Relationship’ (chapter 1) to ‘Success Turned Sour’ (chapter 7), give a clue that things might not bode well. If the first eight chapters offer a more or less linear trajectory, with five chapters on Thatcher, two on Major and one on New Labour (perhaps the least interesting pages), then chapters 9 and 10 offer a more critical reflection on how the British government’s European policy is actually made, and how the term ‘Stranger in Europe’ can best be understood historically.

Chapter 9 is highly informative in explaining the complex Whitehall set-up, explaining the functions of Private Secretary, Private Office and the European Secretariat in the Cabinet Office. In Wall’s experience, while the textbooks may describe policy-making as ordered, logical, rational and predictable, it is actually extraordinarily, complex, changing and reflective, taking place against an inherited view of ‘the national interest’. Here, Wall discusses the distinctive features of the British civil service – its apolitical nature, passion to

share information and coordination among officials and ministers. Structures have changed since the 1980s: the elaborate system of official-level committees meeting regularly under the chairmanship of the European Secretariat is no longer hierarchical, while British embassies in EU countries, foreign ministers meeting as the General Affairs Council, and ambassadors within COREPER all perform a diminished role. Though the Foreign Office and Ministry of Agriculture are supposedly pro-European, “no unless” is the common response from Whitehall departments to any proposed EU legislation, compared to the “yes if” response of many EU partners – because suspicion does not need to be taught: ‘it is rooted in our national psyche, the psyche of an island nation which has lived by resisting Continental encroachment’ (p 200).

Wall is convinced that Britain should play a positive role in Europe, but flags up the seriousness with which it has long taken its EU obligation – into the 1990s, with Denmark it had the best record of faithful implementation, and remains rigorous in transposition. Influence may be less about institutional structures, however, and more down to personalities and their ability to calculate what is best for Britain. In this regard, the book is alone worth reading for the portrait painted of Thatcher: she is highly colourful, expressionistic, stubborn, bloody-minded, unsympathetic, domineering, finger-pointing, whisky-swilling, rumbustious, uninvincible, tactical, sceptical, immoral and blame-seeking. Yet she is also trident, instinctive, tough, pragmatic, ideological, emotional, ferociously energetic and intransigent, a believer and, importantly, a self-believer. She is capable of being condescending (towards Delors’ predecessor, Gaston Thorn), admiring but sceptical (of Mitterrand and not of Kohl), fearful and hostile (of German resurgence), myopic (concerning the greater forces favouring unification), ill-judging (of the potential for EMU) and deeply mistrusting (of the Foreign Office as well as the whole Brussels machinery). In the final years, she is running out of rope, capable of tears of rage and humiliation, reckless, isolated, alienating, unreasonable, irritating, prejudiced, but always resilient. In short, she was a highly-skilled politician. Notably, the Thatcher Foundation did not object to the book’s publication.

Wall offers political scientists a fascinating and subtle insight into the art of negotiation, by meticulously recounting the skilled gamesmanship of Britain’s PMs when confronted with dead-ends, red lights and *impasses*, and illustrating their ability to manoeuvre when the odds are against them (Major on the social protocol), or seizing the moment and deciding to settle (Thatcher on the budget). The chapters build up a narrative that snakes through Fontainebleau, Bruges, Milan, Maastricht, Amsterdam and Nice, taking in the CAP debate, 1984 budget rebate and 1988 fateful speech, the supposed ‘game, set and match’ of Maastricht and subsequent political peddling. The book gets under the prime ministerial skin, with invaluable anecdotes and titbits about the trials and tribulations, strategies and struggles of respective leaderships - essential reading for those hooked on the long-running political soap opera that is Britain’s membership of the EU. Hugely valuable in an academic sense, it is also entertaining in its character studies. In terms of intelligent and revealing insight into Britain’s (little) evolving position on Europe, if *Yes Minister* provided slices of comedic bread, *A Stranger in Europe* serves up copious dollops of academically-nutritious filling.
