

The Pyramid of Parliamentary Power

To understand how the EU Lisbon treaty affects our lives it helps to go back to basics. The classical concept of western representative democracy as developed in this country is quite simple. Everybody has the right to vote for someone to represent them in the legislature, the body or bodies that have the power to make law. In addition each individual has total control over their own life except in areas where laws have been created that affect this control. If you wish to buy just free-range chicken after seeing Jamie Oliver in action you can, the government doesn't control this aspect of your life – although it might decide to in the future. So if we tried to represent this in a diagram it might look something like this.

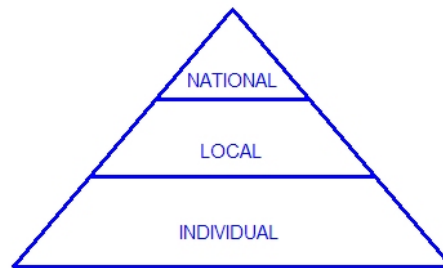


Figure 1 – basic Pyramid of Parliamentary Power

We are keeping it simple for clarity. All aspects of national government are covered by the top segment, all local government by the middle segment and the areas of individual control the bottom segment. The segments are evenly sized to indicate an 'ideal' balance between the powers (whatever that might be – the split is the stuff of politics!). The pyramidal shape is intended to indicate the reduction in the number of people involved as you rise higher up the pyramid. From approximately 60 million individuals at the bottom all the way up to one state at the top. The next diagram introduces arrows to indicate two things (a) how the members of the tiers of government are appointed (elected) and (b) the flow of control (power) that comes back down the pyramid from the law makers.

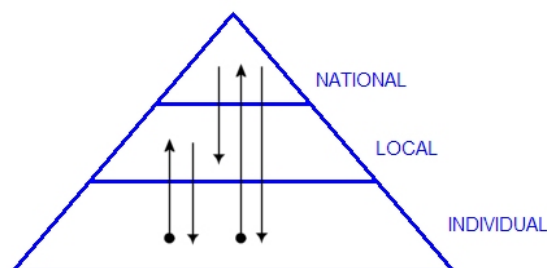


Figure 2 – pyramid with control

Now it is definitely fair to say that UK government is 'big'. We are in the era of the 'Nanny state' and approximately 45% of the UK's domestic product is now spent by the government (up from under 40% in the early 1990's). The burden of regulation flowing from our government is so high that it has to use 'Enabling acts', that effectively bypass parliament, to get it all onto the statute books. According to the World Economic Forum report in November 2007 the UK now has the

second most complex tax system in the world (second only to India). All this affects individuals (in their work and home lives) as well as local government. Diagrammatically our pyramid should look more like this.

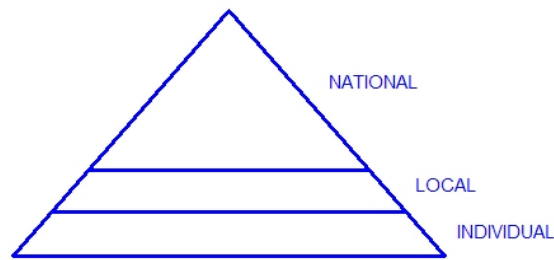


Figure 3 – The 'big government' top heavy pyramid

It is also too simplistic to represent the top section as just UK central government. In reality 70% or more of UK law is handed down to the UK government by the European Union, so if we add the EU to the pyramid along with its 'power' arrows we get something like this:

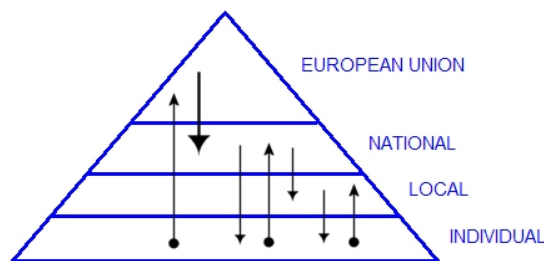


Figure 4 – Adding the EU to the picture

The EU effectively bypasses the UK government because all that our Parliament can do is to rubber stamp it into UK law – it can't reject or amend it, so the arrows should bypass 'Local' and 'National' government. We also need to add some detail to the EU layer as one of the problems with the EU is that, while it all may sound democratic, it isn't democratic. There is a very distinct divide between the people that we vote for and the people who exercise the power.

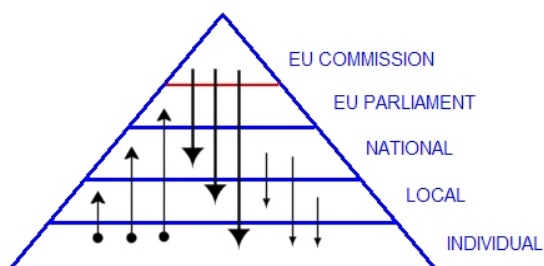


Figure 6 – Splitting the EU layer into the Parliament and the Commission/Institutions.

While it may seem that we are voting for MEPs who sit in a 'parliament' much like the UK parliament, this is an illusion. The European Parliament is effectively just a debating society that can produce recommendations – a better name would be something like the EU Advisory Council.

This is because:

- (1) Unlike the UK parliament the EU parliament cannot propose new laws. In the EU only the civil servants (the EU Commission) can introduce legislation. Even if 100% of the MEPs were agreed on something they wanted done they could not introduce a new piece of legislation. This also means that there is no 'party in power' and no such a thing as 'government policy' or equivalent of the The Queen's Speech.
- (2) When the EU parliament has been presented with legislation by the EU Commission it is at best a rubber-stamping exercise. The EU parliament operates under four 'procedures'. These are the procedures of Consultation, Co-operation, Co-decision and Assent. Only under the procedure of 'Assent' does the EU Parliament have any binding powers (and that is hardly ever used). Under the other procedures it is effectively just a talking shop.
- (3) Unlike the UK parliament the EU parliament does not operate like a 'proper' democratic parliament. Most MEPs can only speak for 90 seconds on any issue and to cope with the huge amount of legislation that a bureaucratic nightmare like the EU creates it has to be rushed through as fast as possible. Up to 400 votes can be taken in any one hour using the push-button voting system. Democratic debate and scrutiny of the proposed law simply does not exist.
- (4) At any time the EU Commission can withdraw legislation before the EU parliament and kill it dead.

This is a more accurate illustration of how our UK government now works. Possibly the only thing to add is that the process of Regionalisation, where by the UK and other EU member states are being broken into EU Regions. This is designed to allow the EU to by-pass national parliaments and marginalise them. The 'power' that flows to the Local government layer will be more and more from the EU and less and less from the UK parliament as the Regions take over from the traditional forms of local government (the regions are London, Wales, Scotland, Northern Ireland and the 8 English region, South East, South West, etc.). This process has been under way in the UK for a while. They were originally forced on John Major in the 1990's by the EU making them the only groupings that could apply for structural funding from the EU (part of the approximately £1 we get back for every £3 we pay in EU membership fees – close to £10 billion this year, or over £1 million for every hour of every day). John Prescott's failed attempt to get an elected Assembly in the North East region of England only stopped the democratic 'window dressing'. All Regions have assemblies (unelected except in London, Scotland, Northern Ireland and Wales) and they are growing in power. So our pyramid now looks like the following:

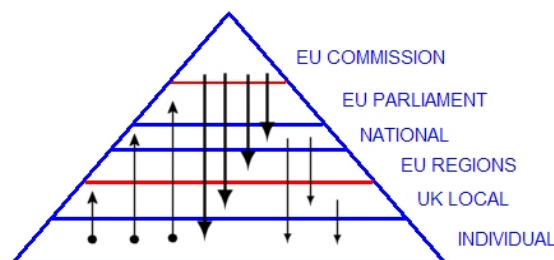


Figure 8 – The Future - EU layer by-passing the UK parliament.

The whole topic of EU origins of Regionalisation has been kept very quiet in this country but the government-explained.doc Page 3 of 4

EU is very much the primary driver. The full title of the EU is the 'European Union of the Regions' and even as far back as 1992 the Maastricht treaty specified, among other things, how each EU Region would send two delegates to the 'EU Committee of the Regions'.

Interestingly the French are just waking up to the fact that EU Regionalisation is happening there too - although, as in the UK, it kicked off in France in the 1990's. Their 100 local 'départments' are being taken over by 26 EU 'régions'. The issue that has brought it to the fore is a battle over the replacement of the 'département' car number plates that identify where the car is from with new EU style registration plates that don't. Something that has touched a nerve in many French peoples sense of local identity.

This 'big' government also distorts the economic picture. The EU likes to pretend that it consults businesses in the relevant sectors before introducing legislation. Unfortunately this usually means that it listens to the representatives of organised big business and not to the views of the less well organised small business. The ensuing legislation therefore usually hits small businesses harder than big ones, who with their large HR departments for example, can afford to cater for it. The 1993 legislation concerning the new standards for abattoirs was produced as a result of consultation with the representatives of the large industrial abattoir companies. In the UK this was the Federation of Fresh Meat Wholesalers. As a result the legislation helped the big companies, who wanted to export their goods and could afford the start up costs to apply the new standards to their factories, but bankrupted the small companies. In 1993 there were 1,385 abattoirs in the UK but by 1998 only 280 independent abattoirs remained. It is just a simple fact that it is easier for the central planners to deal with a few major companies (who will account for a large percentage of the economic activity) than thousands of small companies with differing requirements. Just to put it all into perspective, out of the 100 biggest economies on the planet only 49 are sovereign states the other 51 are multinational companies. Obviously the EU isn't totally responsible for this growth of big business but it sure is helping them along.

This final pyramid does give a good picture of the way our country is governed at the moment. This top down control impacts our lives in so many ways, many we are totally unaware about. The mere fact that so much power belongs to the EU explains why our politicians look so similar and will increasingly become more so – there is so little that they can differ about. The EU Lisbon treaty will not change the overall picture of our 'pyramid' much. The treaty hands power over 68 more policy areas from the UK government to the EU. So 'EU' the top layer of the pyramid will get a bit larger and the bottom three UK area will be squeezed a little thinner. It is another of the 'salami slices' of UK sovereignty and power that has been taken slowly and surreptitiously for decades now. What is worrying about this particular treaty is the "simplified revision procedure" for amending existing Treaties contained in article IV-444. This article means that the EU can take more power without having to go to the fuss of drawing up any new treaties in the future (so there will be no more embarrassing calls for referenda etc.). The bottom line is that nothing will change until we get back to the simpler pyramid illustrated in figure 2 and the only way that is going to happen is if we can get the EU out of our system.

Michael Wigley
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