

## **Government and Public Services in an Age of Austerity: a Comparative Study of France and the United Kingdom (Paris, 2-3 December 2016)**

This international conference is being organised by several institutions (notably the Universities of Paris 1 and 3, France Stratégie and Policy Network). It aims to examine the evolution of government and public services in an age of austerity, from a comparative France-UK point of view. The conference will be trans-disciplinary and seeks to bring together policy-makers and actors, as well as researchers and academics. The goal is to compare national experiences from a sectoral point of view (education, health, transport, defence, etc.), as well as from an institutional perspective (local, national and transnational government, changing citizenship, etc.).

### **The Context:**

The financial crisis and Great Recession led most industrialised countries to provide significant fiscal support for demand in 2008 and 2009, along with massive intervention to aid national banking sectors. As a result, public sector indebtedness rose substantially, almost everywhere and regardless of previous successes, or not, in controlling public finances. In 2010, the broad policy of Keynesian stimulus gave way to fiscal consolidation, especially in Europe. This shift ushered in a new age of “austerity”, with governments seeking to reduce deficits, often through holding down public expenditure growth. The United Kingdom and France both followed this policy switch, albeit in somewhat different terms.

In the UK, the key turnaround in policy came with the election of the Conservative and Liberal-Democrat Coalition government in May 2010. It quickly and visibly embarked on a programme of public spending cuts, with the aim of ending the government deficit (of more than 10% of GDP in 2010) by the end of its five-year term in office. In the event, the deficit was “only” halved by 2015, so that the Conservative government elected in May 2015 still faces the significant task of closing the budget gap in the years ahead. Whatever exactly happens, Britain’s Chancellor of the Exchequer George Osborne has quite clearly set out his plan for significantly reducing the size of the public sector in the UK to around 35% of GDP. This is a clear break with what could be called the “New Labour paradigm” of public sector development, based on pursuing the marketisation and liberalisation of public services accompanied by massive increases in public spending in the 2000s (until the crisis). The goal, in the words of George Osborne, is to shift Britain “from a low wage, high tax, high welfare economy; to [a] higher wage, lower tax, lower welfare country” (Budget Speech, July 2015).

The fiscal situation in France has also been characterised by similar, if somewhat more balanced moves to consolidation, with reference to the European Fiscal Compact. This Compact was signed in 2012 and reaffirms the commitment of Eurozone (EZ) countries to fiscal consolidation. In France, the result has been pressure to bring down deficits under the previous conservative governments (of President Nicolas Sarkozy and Prime Minister François Fillon (2007-2012)) and under the present socialist governments (President François Hollande and Prime Ministers Jean-Marc Ayrault (2012-2014) and Manuel Valls (2014-)). The drive to austerity was mainly borne by cuts in government spending under the Sarkozy-Fillon administration and by a mixture of spending controls and tax increases thereafter. Though the deficit has fallen, France has repeatedly delayed bringing it below the 3% of GDP ceiling set out in various EU/EZ documents. As a result, pressure on government spending – “austerity” – is likely to continue into the foreseeable future.

## **The areas to be addressed by the conference:**

The conference and research project aim to examine how government and public services are evolving in France and the United Kingdom given these pressures on public finances. To this end, it proposes examining four broad areas of government action and public policy:

**1/ The economics and politics of “austerity”.** This involves asking what “austerity” really is, as well as how and why it came to characterise government spending. To what extent is austerity a further entrenchment of neoliberalism? Is today’s austerity really any different from spending controls in the past?

**2/ Historical and cultural approaches to government and public services.** France and the UK are among Europe’s oldest nation-states. In many ways, government in both countries does similar things. But differences exist in both national traditions, in the relationship between the State and markets, as well as between government and citizens. This area of research seeks to examine these historical and cultural similarities and differences.

**3/ Sectoral studies.** Panel sessions in the conference will analyse how specific governmental and public services are evolving in today’s environment. Areas to be examined include: health, education, housing, network services, transport, culture, policies relating to income transfers (pensions, unemployment pay, etc.), employment policy, “national security” services. The conference will also look at questions of public service governance, private finance, etc.

**4/ Local, regional and European government.** Since the 1980s, France and the United Kingdom have experienced significant changes in the balance of power between the centre and regional government (France’s “decentralisation”/devolution in 1983; the devolution of power in the UK in 1998 to Scotland especially, but also to Northern Ireland and Wales). At the same time, European legislation and jurisprudence are also increasingly affecting national governments (and will likely continue to do so through the Single Market, even in the event of Brexit). This part of the research will examine new approaches to government and public services which are emerging at the sub-national level. It will also examine the broad consequences of European engagement in terms of rights and access to public services.

**Working languages:** English and French.

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**Organisation Committee:** Daniel Agacinski (France Strat  gie), No  lle Burgi (CNRS, CESSP), David Fee (Paris 3, CREC), Isabelle Hirtzlin (Paris 1, CES), An  mone Kober-Smith (Paris 3, Pl  iade), Sandrine Mahieu (Ministry of Culture), Pierre Pech (Paris 1, Ladyss), Nicholas Sowels (Paris 1, CREC), and Renaud Thillaye (Policy Network).

**Please send your proposals for a contribution (300 word summary and short CV) to [nicholas.sowels@univ-paris1.fr](mailto:nicholas.sowels@univ-paris1.fr) by 31 May 2016.**