Treaty of Amsterdam

Introduction

The Treaty of Amsterdam (1997) was the third major amendment to the arrangements made under the Treaty of Rome (1957). It was largely an exercise in tying up the loose ends left over from the Maastricht Treaty (1992). However, in the ways in which it changed the operation of the Council of the European Union, absorbed the Schengen Convention and increased the role of the EU in home affairs, it pushed forward the model of a supranational European Union at the expense of intergovernmental co-operation.

History

A Reflection Group was set up in 1995 to discuss which steps the EU should take after the Treaty of Maastricht. The Maastricht Treaty had not covered all the issues raised during the debates of the 1980s – in particular, the Schengen Convention on open borders remained outside the main body of EU Law while the Social Chapter that was meant to be included in the 1992 Treaty had actually only been ‘tacked on’ as an extra protocol because of British opposition. On the horizon, meanwhile, was the prospect of enlargement of the EU to include the former communist countries of Eastern Europe. Concerns also existed about the lack of democratic accountability within the EU – the so-called ‘democratic deficit’. These issues laid the groundwork for an Inter-Governmental Conference (IGC) that began in Turin on 29 March 1996. However, progress on the IGC was slow and the Treaty of Amsterdam was only signed in 1997 after the change of government in Britain in May that year. The Treaty came into force on 1 May 1999.

What did the Treaty of Amsterdam do?

The most symbolically important gesture of the Treaty of Amsterdam was the framework sketched out for the future accession of ten new member states. This projected an image of a Europe soon to be united across the old Iron Curtain. Yet it made many more immediate changes. It absorbed the Schengen Convention into EU law, creating open borders between twelve of the member states; expanded the role of the Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) by creating a High Representative to take overall responsibility for EU foreign affairs, and extended the powers of Europol, the European police agency, on the understanding that both these powers were controlled intergovernmentally.

Most significantly however, it changed the way that decisions were made in the EU by expanding the number of decisions covered by Qualified Majority Voting (QMV), including on some foreign policy issues. For this first time, it gave the Commission a say over the majority of Justice and Home Affairs, which had previously been in the hands of the European Council. It also created the idea of enhanced co-operation to allow some members to co-operate more closely on areas outside the remit of the EU treaties without unanimous agreement. At the same time, however, it recognised the idea of constructive abstention – whereby a member state could opt out of security or foreign affairs without preventing other countries from going ahead.
How does a General Election actually work?

The UK is a liberal democracy. This means that we democratically elect politicians, who represent our interests. It also involves that individual rights are protected.

The type of liberal democracy we have is a constitutional monarchy, where the powers of the monarch are limited by the terms and conditions put down in the constitution.

Parliamentary system

The UK has a parliamentary system of democratic governance. Unlike presidential and semi-presidential systems, there is an interconnection between the legislative (law-making) and executive (law-enforcing) branches of government in a parliamentary system.

In the UK, this means that the executive (consisting of the Queen and the governments of England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland) is accountable to the legislature or Parliament (House of Commons, House of Lords and devolved Assemblies in Wales and Northern Ireland).

Appointed Prime Minister (or chancellor) as Head of Government and a monarch (or ceremonial president) as Head of State.

First Past the Post

Members of Parliament in the House of Commons are elected using the first past the post electoral system. Each of the 650 voting constituencies in the UK are represented by an MP. During the general and most local elections, the candidate with most of the votes becomes the local representative. Candidates campaign door-to-door, hold debates and publish manifestos (comparable to shopping list of what they are planning to do once they are in power). Eligible voters, about 46m in the UK, receive their polling card once they register online, or they can vote by post.

Party with most of the votes is invited by the Queen to form a government. If there is no clear winner, there is a hung Parliament. In this case, a minority or coalition government can be formed. A minority government does not have an overall majority in Parliament. A coalition government means that two or more political parties agree to share power in government. If that does not work out, new elections may be called.

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