

Research impact: making a difference

Improving the governance of the Greek Prime Minister's Office

LSE/Manchester research highlights institutional weaknesses at the heart of the Greek government and both issue and solutions are pushed up the political agenda

What was the problem?

Successive Greek governments had struggled to steer and implement their major policy reforms. The Eurozone crisis further exposed the limited capacity of the Greek government to implement structural reforms.

The constraints on government came from different sources, but the state administration itself had been weak for decades. A large, ill-coordinated state apparatus had developed, which laboured under suffocating legal procedures, lack of skills and expertise, and a politicisation of the appointments process.

What did we do?

Kevin Featherstone, LSE Professor of Contemporary Greek Studies, and Dimitris Papdimitriou, Professor of European Politics at the University of Manchester (and formerly of the LSE's Hellenic Observatory), highlighted the Greek 'paradox of governance' in their book *The Limits of Europeanization: Reform Capacity and Policy Conflict in Greece* (2008) and in later writings.

The crux of this paradox was that although many identified the Greek Prime Minister (PM) with strong formal powers, in reality the PM was handicapped by limited resources and a complex bureaucracy that was not fit for purpose. The PM was 'an emperor without clothes': the reality contradicted the legal fiction.

Featherstone and Papadimitriou went on to examine all Greek administrations since 1974 and concluded that the very structure of Greek government limited its ability to reform. Fieldwork for the additional research (2008-2010) involved numerous personal interviews with key players, including each surviving Greek prime minister as well as many former ministers and senior advisors.

Featherstone and Papadimitriou presented the research at a conference at Yale University in May 2009, expanding on the key findings, which included:

- The limited personnel and skills resources available to the Greek Prime Minister
- The limited operational power of the Greek government

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- The ineffectiveness of Greek administrative structures and the lack of continuity of specialist personnel (which led, inexorably, to)
- Inadequate policy monitoring and undermining of the achievement of government objectives
- The contrasts between the Greek case and that of governments in other European countries.

What happened?

The Limits of Europeanisation was published in both English and Greek and was reviewed across Greek media.

Featherstone wrote articles in leading Greek newspapers, as well as giving interviews, presentations and public lectures, including one at the Residence of the British Ambassador in Athens. This established a high profile for the research. Featherstone advocated a set of reforms to strengthen the PM's office.

After winning the 2009 election, the new Prime Minister, George Papandreou, invited Featherstone to join an informal group of advisors to review the organisation of his office and its relations with the rest of government. In 2010, Papandreou appointed Featherstone to join a new five-member committee charged with bringing forward proposals for reform. The invitation was itself predicated on one of Featherstone's key ideas – that control and coordination of government should be strengthened from the centre. The Committee brought out its recommendations in 2010 with Featherstone as its rapporteur and responsible for editing the final report, which was later presented to Parliament.

The research of Featherstone and Papadimitriou helped to formulate a new debate about governance in Greece and it had a direct influence on the Prime Minister's thinking in the following areas:

- The sharp contrast between the public impression of powerful government and the actual constraints at its core since 1974
- The contrast between resources available to the Greek government and those available to similar-sized European states
- The need to strengthen control and coordination within government, including policy evaluation

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- The type of organisational structure and functions needed to address the institutional weakness at the centre of government in Athens.

In a televised Cabinet meeting in 2010, PM Papandreou quoted Featherstone's articles in support of his organisational reforms. Featherstone was the only member of the committee to be cited by name.

The government announced its intention to bring forward reforms in line with the Committee's recommendations and, in January 2011, Parliament voted on the creation of a General Secretariat to the Prime Minister which would have powers to control and monitor internal government processes.

Following the deepening economic crisis, the Papandreou Government was unable to fully complete the Committee's suggested reforms, but they were still regarded as crucial to the ability of the Greek government to meet the conditions of its 'bail-out' loans, as evidenced by the following:

- An Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development report on Greece criticised the lack of central coordination of the reform agenda and cited Featherstone and Papdimitriou's research
- The Greece-IMF 'Letter of Intent' – setting the terms of Greece's 'bail-out' loans - required organisational reform at the heart of government
- Featherstone was invited by the Head of the European Commission's Taskforce for Greece to attend a private one-on-one briefing session.

In January 2013, a new law was adopted which provided for the creation of a 'General Secretariat for the Coordination of the Government', headed by a Secretary General appointed for a five-year term and supported by a permanent staff.

Professor Kevin Featherstone holds the Eleftherios Venizelos Chair in Contemporary Greek Studies and is Director of the Hellenic Observatory at the LSE. He has written extensively on the politics of modern Greece and of the European Union. His work has been acknowledged by the European Parliament in 2014 when it included one of his co-authored books in its list of the '100 books on Europe to remember' and by the President of Greece in 2013 when he made him 'Commander – Order of the Phoenix', the most prestigious honour bestowed by the Hellenic Republic to a foreign national.

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