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Research Note 60

## The Foreign and Commonwealth Office's purchase of EU Flags

The EU enjoys many of the trappings of a state. It has an anthem and a patron saint, a passport and a President. But it is the EU flag that is the most well known symbol of the union.

In the absence of a genuinely 'European' identity, the EU depends heavily on symbols like the flag to reinforce its legitimacy. Indeed with the Lisbon treaty's establishment of a new EU diplomatic corps, the 'twelve stars on a blue background' will soon come to supplant the historic flags of member states in the world's foreign capitals. Already the EU flag can be seen fluttering above the doors of UK Government buildings and local town halls.

The Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO) has become a particularly keen waver of the EU flag, hanging it proudly next to the Union Jack on many of its buildings. In the last year alone it purchased 51 'gold'n'blues'. But just how much are UK taxpayers paying for this flag waving? A Freedom of Information request was sent to the FCO to find out.

### Key findings of this research note are:

- The number and cost of EU flags bought by the FCO for use in the UK and its missions overseas, in each of the last 5 financial years, was:

Year	Number of Flags	Cost
2008-09	51	£2,686
2007-08	39	£2,167
2006-07	34	£1,665
2005-06	39	£2,949
2004-05*	86	£4,536
<b>Total</b>	<b>249</b>	<b>£14,003</b>

\* For part of 2004-05 the UK held the rotating presidency of the EU Council of Ministers.

- Over the past five years, **the FCO has bought 249 EU flags at a cost of £14,003.**
- **Each EU flag cost approximately £56 each.**
- Over the past five years **the FCO has purchased more flags than it has Embassies and High Commissions overseas.** In 2004 the FCO conducted a cost review of its operations, leading to the closure of 19 diplomatic missions. With the department facing a further 22 per cent cut in its budget in 2009-10 (£0.5 billion), the decline of the FCO overseas – and by association the Union Jack – will continue. This decline should be seen in the context of the growth in the EU's own self-flagged, diplomatic corps.<sup>1</sup>

The FCO will not be the only department to buy EU flags. Total UK government expenditure on these flags will be much higher, particularly if local authorities are included.

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Dr Lee Rotherham, EU analyst at the TaxPayers' Alliance:

*"While the sums involved are small beer, the principles are clear cut and the problem symptomatic. With the extraordinary growth of the EU's own diplomatic service, Britain's Foreign Office will have to fight all the harder to retain its own individuality, identity and distinct set of purpose. A flag helps to serve as a reminder of whose interests they should be defending, and to whom they owe their loyalty to. There's only one Union flag that should be flying from official buildings, and that doesn't have stars on it."*

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To discuss the research and arrange broadcast interviews, please contact:

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.taxpayersalliance.com/EUDiplomats.pdf>