

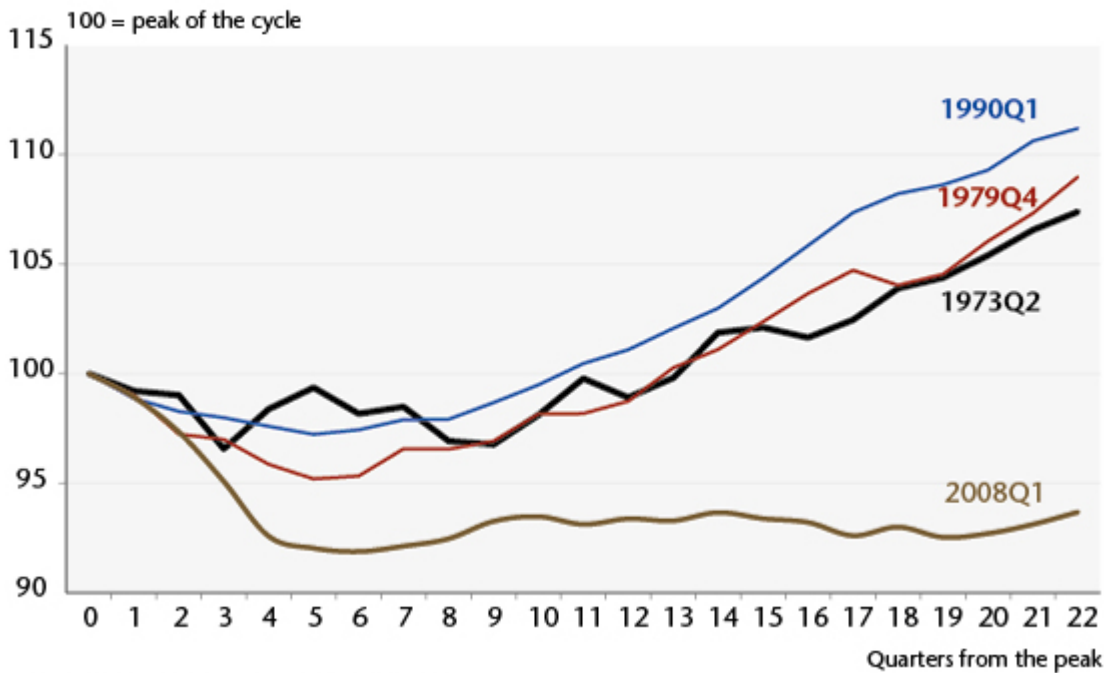
# Renewed growth in the United Kingdom in 2013: trompe-l'oeil effects

By [Catherine Mathieu](#)

The latest estimate of the British national accounts, published on 27 November, confirmed GDP growth of 0.8% in the third quarter of 2013, following 0.7% in the second quarter and 0.4% in the first quarter. This represents a sparkling performance for the UK economy, especially in comparison with the euro zone. GDP was up 1.5% year on year in the third quarter of 2013 in the UK, against -0.4% in the euro zone, 0.2% in France and 0.6% in Germany. In the eyes of some observers, Britain's return to growth shows that fiscal austerity does not undermine growth ... on the contrary. But the argument seems at a minimum questionable.

Let's look at the numbers a little more closely. Admittedly, GDP is up 1.5% year on year in the third quarter, but it rose by only 0.1% in 2012 and is still 2.5 percentage points below its pre-crisis level: this does not really represent a great success. Even more striking has been the change in GDP since the start of the crisis: GDP initially fell 7 points between the first quarter of 2008 and the second quarter of 2009; the recovery then got underway, allowing GDP to rise 2 points in the third quarter of 2010, before it fell again. The GDP trajectory since the third quarter of 2010 has been quite unusual with respect to recoveries from previous crises (Figure 1).

Figure 1. Change In British GDP during recessions and recoveries



Source: Office for National Statistics (ONS).

In 2008, the United Kingdom was one of the first industrialized countries to implement a recovery plan. Gordon Brown, Chancellor of the Exchequer in the Tony Blair government, lowered the standard VAT rate by 2.5 percentage points in December 2008 in an effort to boost household consumption. The measure, which was announced as temporary, was ended in late 2009. In 2009, fiscal policy was highly expansionary, with a fiscal impulse of 2.8 percent of GDP following a 0.6 point impulse in 2008 (Table 1). The public deficit increased under the dual impact of the recession and fiscal policy, as did the public debt.

In May 2010, the Conservatives won the election on a programme focused on reducing the public debt and deficit. This was supposed to ensure market confidence and maintain the AAA rating of Britain's public debt, and thus keep the interest rate on the debt at a low level. This was combined with a very active monetary policy, with the Bank of England maintaining its key rate at 0.5%, buying government securities and making great efforts to facilitate the refinancing of banks and kick-start lending to businesses and households. The resumption of growth was supposed to come from business investment and

exports.

The fiscal policy implemented by the David Cameron government has therefore been highly restrictive. At first, the measures focused on increasing revenue by raising the VAT rate and cutting spending, including on social benefits. The resumption of growth was interrupted. Fiscal policy had also become restrictive elsewhere in Europe, so economic activity slowed in the UK's main trading partners. In 2012, fiscal austerity was sharply curtailed (Table 1). The growth figures in recent times are a long way from demonstrating the success of austerity.

**Table 1. Growth and fiscal impulses in the United Kingdom since 2008**

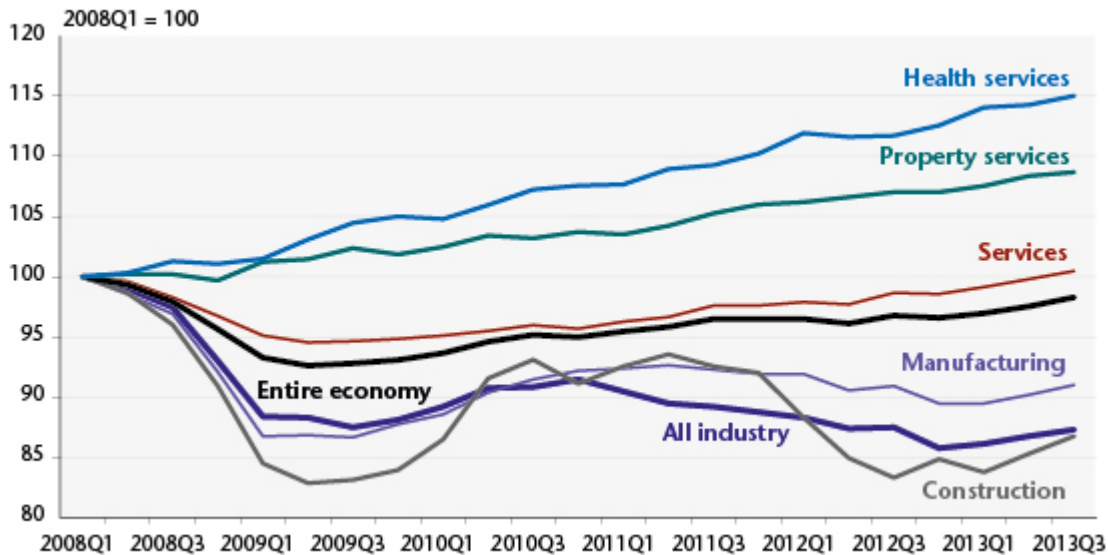
	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012
Growth	-0,8	-5,2	1,7	1,1	0,1
Fiscal impulse	0,6	2,8	-2,7	-3,2	-0,5

Sources : Office for National Statistics (ONS), OECD, author's estimates.

It is also important to note that David Cameron has excluded health expenditure from his cost-cutting plan. The British are attached to their public health care system, and the newly elected Conservatives were determined in 2010 not to repeat the mistake made in the 1980s when Margaret Thatcher was head of government. So fiscal austerity has not hit the health sector. The result is clear in terms of activity: value added (by volume) in the health sector is now 15 points above its pre-crisis level – in other words, it has continued to grow at an average annual rate of nearly 3% (Figure 2). The second sector where activity has remained strong since 2008, and which has even accelerated since the end of 2012, is real estate. Property prices in the UK had risen sharply before the crisis, leading to record household debt, and have not dropped much since then. Indeed, they have remained historically high and even begun to rise from 2012 (at an annual rate of about 5%). But other sectors are lagging behind. Most services have for instance only now regained the level of pre-crisis output, and some of them are still well below this level: -9% for

financial services and insurance, which is comparable to the figure for manufacturing, while output in the building sector is down 13%.

**Figure 2. : Changes in added value (in volume) by sector since the onset of the crisis**



Source: Office for National Statistics (ONS).

Since 2008, British growth has thus been driven in part by a public service spared from fiscal austerity and by real estate services supported by an ultra-active monetary policy... The British recovery could, moreover, give birth to a new housing bubble. Household consumption is now the main engine of growth (Table 2). The failure of investment to pick up represents one of the main setbacks suffered by the supply-side policy implemented since 2010 by the government. The government wants to make the UK tax system the most competitive in the G20, and to this end has slashed the corporate tax rate to the lowest in the G20 (the rate, lowered to 23% this year, will be only 20% in 2015). But business investment has nevertheless not picked up again. The government is also relying on exports to drive growth, but given the economic situation prevailing in Britain's main foreign markets, in particular the euro zone, this is just not realistic. After having experienced sustained growth in previous quarters, boosted by strong sales outside the European Union until the summer, exports have contributed to a sharp fall-off in growth in the third quarter (-0.8 GDP point). As the British government prepares to present its

budget on 5 December, support for fiscal policy would be welcome to help keep the UK economy on the road to recovery in the coming months...

**Tableau 2. Contributions of demand components to growth**

In GDP points (except GDP)

	2010		2011		2012		2013	
	1st half	2nd half	1st half	2nd half	1st half	2nd half	1st half	2nd half
<b>GDP, in %</b>	1,3	0,8	0,4	0,6	-0,3	0,2	0,6	0,8
Household consumption	0,2	0,6	-0,6	0,1	0,5	0,4	0,6	0,5
Spending by general government	0,0	0,0	0,0	0,0	0,4	-0,1	0,1	0,1
<b>GFCF</b>	0,7	0,2	-0,4	0,1	0,5	-0,8	-0,2	0,2
Productive private	0,6	0,0	-0,2	0,1	0,4	-0,5	-0,2	0,1
Change in inventory	1,0	0,4	0,0	0,6	-1,0	0,7	-0,2	0,9
<b>Foreign trade</b>	-0,5	-0,3	1,5	-0,2	-0,6	-0,0	0,2	-0,9
Exports	1,1	1,1	0,7	0,2	0,1	0,3	0,2	-0,8
Imports	-1,5	-1,4	0,8	-0,4	-0,6	-0,3	-0,0	-0,1

Note: Half-year contributions, except \* 3rd qtr contributions. The sum of the contributions may not correspond exactly to GDP growth, due to rounding.

Source: Office for National Statistics.

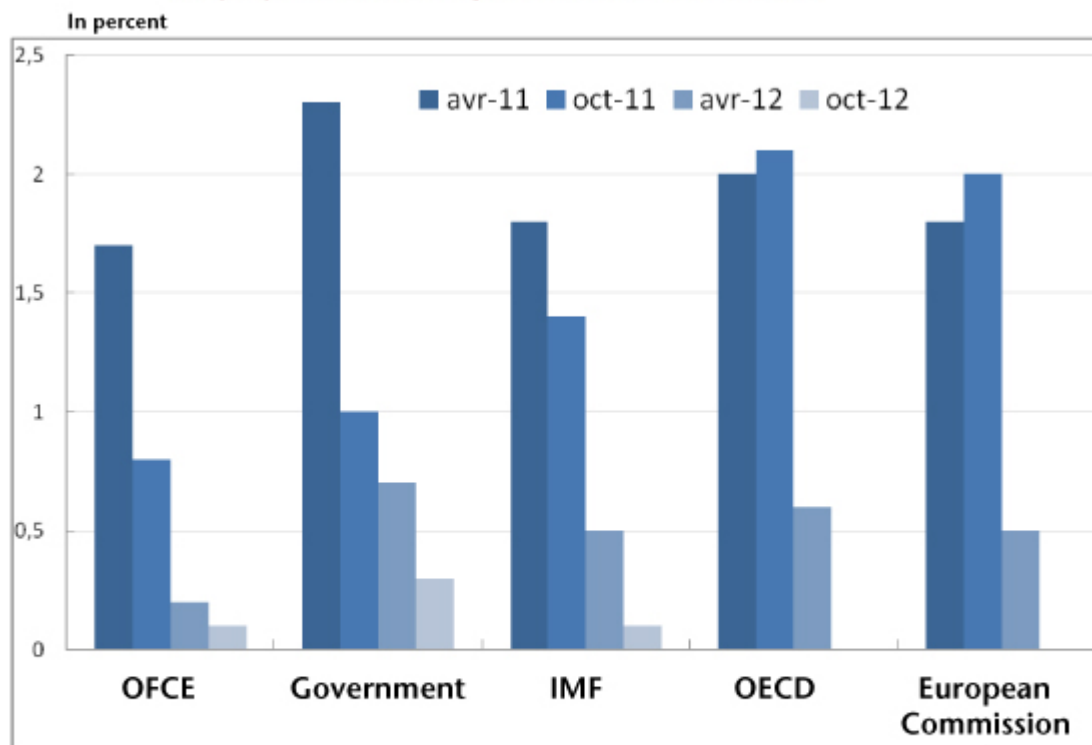
## Why has French growth been revised downwards?

By Bruno Ducoudré and [Eric Heyer](#)

In its [October 2012 forecasts](#), the OFCE has revised its growth forecast for 2012 and 2013. The major international institutions, the OECD, the IMF and the European Commission, also regularly review their growth forecasts to incorporate newly available information. An analysis of these revised forecasts is particularly interesting in that it shows that these institutions use low fiscal multipliers in developing their forecasts. In other words, the recessionary impact of fiscal policy has been underestimated by the OECD, the IMF and

the European Commission, leading to substantial revisions of their growth forecasts, as is evidenced by the dramatic shifts by the [IMF](#) and the [European Commission](#) in the size of the multipliers.

**Graphique 1. Révisions of growth in French GDP for 2012**



Note : Growth in 2012 is reviewed four times each year by each institution. The first revision took place in April 2011, the second in October 2011, the third in April 2012 and the final one in October 2012. The OECD has not yet published its latest revisions.

Sources : IMF, European Commission, OECD, OFCE October 2012 calculations and forecasts.

Figure 1 shows that between the forecast made in April 2011 and the latest available forecast, the government, like all the other institutions, revised its growth forecast for France sharply downwards.

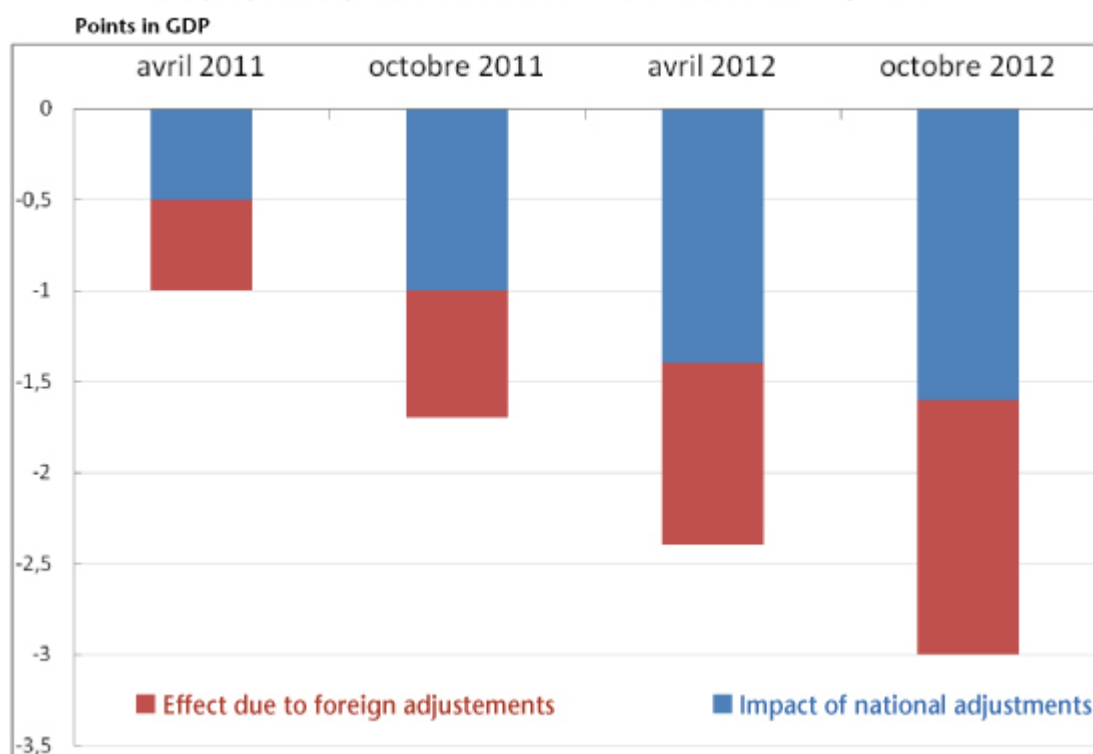
The austerity policies have also been strengthened at the same time, particularly in the euro zone. The European countries undertook their stability program in order to return to balanced public finances within three years. In contrast to the years before the crisis, the implementation of these commitments is now considered a necessary or even sufficient condition for pulling out of the crisis. Moreover, in a context of financial uncertainty, being the only State not to meet its commitment to fiscal consolidation would be punished

immediately by the markets (higher sovereign rates, a downgraded rating, a fine from the European Commission, implicit contagion of sovereign defaults). But in trying to reduce their deficits abruptly and synchronously, Europe's governments are inducing new slowdowns in activity.

A vicious circle has been created: with each downward revision in their forecasts for 2012 growth, Europe's governments implement new austerity measures to meet their deficit commitments. This has happened in France, but especially in Italy, which has virtually tripled its fiscal effort, and in Spain, which is now engaged in the greatest austerity effort of any major European country.

According to our estimates for the French economy (that is to say, using a multiplier of 1), the series of fiscal savings plans adopted at the national level have led to revising growth downwards by -1.1 points between April 2011 and October 2012 (from an impact of -0.5 GDP point to -1.6 points). Since these same policies are in force in our trading partners, this has led to revising growth for this same period by 0.9 point due to foreign trade (from -0.5 GDP point to -1.4 point) (Figure 2).

**Graphique 2. Impact of the latest fiscal adjustments on 2012 growth**



Source : OFCE October 2012 calculations and forecasts.

For the year 2012, the OFCE's revisions for the French economy can be explained in full simply by the escalation in the fiscal savings measures announced over the last 12 months, *i.e.* the national plans and those applied by our partner countries (Table 1).

**Tableau 1. Determinants of the revisions to the OFCE forecast for France for 2012**

	April 2011	October 2012	Revision
GDP growth	1,7	0,1	-1,6
(a) - Austerity measures (in GDP pt)	-0,6	-1,60	-1,0
(b) - Value of the fiscal multiplier	0,95	0,95	0,0
Impact of austerity plans in France (a + b)	-0,5	-1,6	-1,1
Impact of the austerity measures of France's partners	-0,5	-1,4	-0,9
Other adjustment factors			0,4

Source : OFCE calculations.

Leaving aside this escalation of austerity, our diagnosis of the French economy has changed very little over the last 18 months: without it, we would have even revised our growth forecast slightly upwards (0.4%).