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A SPECIAL CASE FOR SPACE?: MARGARET THATCHER AND THE BRITISH NATIONAL SPACE
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Abstract

In 1985 the government of Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher created the British National Space Centre (BNSC). This new, public body was charged with bringing together and improving the coordination of government Departments, which had space interests, along with the interests of industry. It was formed following acceptance by Ministers and the Prime Minister of a report into the organisation of space activity in the UK by the then Chief Scientific Advisor to the government Sir Robin Nicholson. This paper considers in detail the factors contributing to the creation of the BNSC and the form it eventually assumed. It examines specifically the national and international space sector influences on Margaret Thatcher's government that had prompted a major review of the UK's whole approach to space and the programmes and priorities it should consider. It analyses the reasoning, as part of this reassessment of space policy, behind the decision to create the BNSC – this after successive governments since the 1960s had rejected the concept of such a centralising body. The BNSC's first requirement was to produce a Space Plan that would meet the needs of its member Departments and industry under a 'consistent and coherent national programme'. The Plan was delivered promptly by its first Director General, Roy Gibson. It presented options for programmes to be followed - directed by BNSC - and the associated expenditure levels required. The recommended top level option would involve increasing the spend on space by two and a half times the existing levels. After considerable prevarication by the Government these increases were rejected, Gibson resigned and the BNSC remained for the next two decades as a coordinating body with no executive function. The paper looks at the background to the creation of the BNSC, the thinking behind the form it took, and suggests why, despite the Government requesting such a study, it was ultimately deemed to be at odds with Government policy.