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Conclusions: the European Parliament – coming of Age

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Has the European Parliament come of age, as some have argued, or does it not yet enjoy an optimal panoply of powers, as others insist? Do such innovations as the *Spitzenkandidaten* procedure and Jean-Claude Juncker's insistence on a reduced and targeted legislative output represent fresh and significant departures or are they, rather, simply gradations on familiar themes? What should be made of the penultimate European Parliament President Martin Schulz's determination to transform the Parliament into *the* arena for the great and the good to make their speeches and declarations? Was that a passing initiative or the start of a grand tradition? And what should be made of the recent creation, by the Parliament, of its own European Parliamentary Research Service? Is this a sign of a coming of age (remembering that the United States' Congressional Research Service only came into being in 1914)? Does it have implications for the ever-delicate balance between the powers of individual members, with their growing numbers of staffers, and those of the Groups? Does it indicate that the Parliament is becoming steadily more like the United States' House of Representatives in terms of style and powers? Will some of the 73 'spare' seats freed up by the United Kingdom's exit from the European Union ultimately be devoted to the creation of transnational lists and representatives and what would such a measure mean for the Parliament's evolution? Will the European Union's party-political system continue to develop along classic cleavages, or could the rise of more coherent Eurosceptical forces create new cleavages more 'appropriate to a continent'? Will the *Spitzenkandidaten* procedure be repeated in 2019, and what would that mean for the European Union's future constitutional development? (Westlake, 2017) Such a rapid-fire list of questions shows that the European Parliament is still, to say the least, a moving target, if not, as many would argue, a still-evolving institution in a still-evolving system of multi-level governance. There is, therefore, still plenty to study. Or is there?

In their introduction, the editors of this special issue point to a slowing-down in, and routinisation of, research about the European Parliament. Is this, as some speculate might be the case, an indication of a declining interest in the Parliament and the European Union? Is it a case of 'never glad confident morning again'? Has the Parliament become the place where, to quote one recent hyperbolic headline, 'European democracy goes to die'? (Cooper, 2016) Or is it also an indication of a coming of age, simple proof that even revolutionaries must slow down and pace themselves eventually? The rich and varied papers brought together in this collection all point strongly in favour of the coming-of-age thesis. The low-hanging fruit – based on electoral statistics, roll-call analyses, opinion polling – has long since been plucked and processed. Because there are evermore such statistics, the pool to be studied continues to grow and so, too, do the number of studies, though they are necessarily similar to one another in kind. The ordinary legislative procedure will not change now; there is no demand for any major change and no prospect of any IGC that could affect such change, in any case. So, studies will inevitably concentrate on what exists – the pragmatic preference for first reading agreements, for example, or the power of rapporteurs and the informal role of trilogues and the consequences of these for democratic oversight – and on the growing data bases it generates (legislative proposals that reach the third-reading stage, for example, will surely become a subject for research in their own right). But now longer-necked political scientists are beginning to graze at the fruit growing higher up in the trees...

Corentin Poyet points out that ‘At the European level, there is virtually no study about constituency work except a PhD dissertation.’ In other words, ‘scholars know only a little about how MEPs remain connected with their constituents, about their day-to-day practice of representation.’ Poyet’s innovative study of French MEPs shows why this particular area of study should no longer be so neglected. Constituency service, he argues, is a response to a perceived lack of democratic legitimacy, with MEPs travelling back to their constituencies in search of such legitimacy. But, to the extent that it exists, the traffic seems to be mostly one way; ‘MEPs are the experts of European affairs more than members of the Community.’ Meanwhile, ‘micro-linkages between citizens and their European representatives are unknown despite their importance for legislative work.’

Using a ten-year (2004-2014) data set in three of the most powerful committees in the European Parliament, Silje Synnove Lyder Hermansen shows convincingly how specialisation, dedication and loyalty to the Group line are the best guarantors when it comes to the allocation of legislative rapporteurships. Contrarily, acting as rapporteur on own-initiative reports reduces the likelihood that an MEP will be allocated future legislative rapporteurships, and switching committees is to be avoided. ‘The European Parliament,’ Lyder Hermansen drily observes, ‘is not the place for “all round” politicians.’ But what effect does such heavy and exclusive policy specialisation have on the Parliament’s more general ability to hold the executive to account? Of course, legislative rapporteurships are not the only way to maintain a high profile and influence in the European Parliament. Noted constitutionalists and former ministers and commissioners, for example, carry their own authority and even enhance it by remaining above nuts-and-bolts legislative work. Foreign policy, constitutional affairs and, linked to those, changes to the rules of procedure are also areas where reputations can be made without reliance on rapporteurships of any sort. And, in general, it is rarely legislative rapporteurs who set the tone in the grand set-piece debates (such as the annual State of the Union exercise, for example). Nevertheless, here, surely, is food for thought and space for further study.

William Daniel and Shawna Metzger start from the observation that turnover is as much a within-legislature as between-legislature phenomenon before going on to show how one of the most important determining factors of early returns to domestic politics is the existence of closed party lists. This leads them to observe that ‘the extent to which differing political systems continue to treat the same legislative space differently will continue to affect not only the EP’s legislative power and productivity, but also its effectiveness as the only directly-elected EU institution.’ Echoing all the other contributions in this collection, they further observe that ‘the nexus between national and European political life in EP careers remains an under-appreciated research agenda.’ Again, further research could usefully determine to what extent parliamentary careers have been evolving. Do ambitious parliamentarians still return to domestic politics to further their careers when they can? Or do they, rather, increasingly recognise the Parliament as the main destination? *That* would surely add grist to the coming-of-age mill.

Nathalie Brack and Olivier Costa examine another long-neglected aspect of the European Parliament’s development; its rule-making autonomy and its imaginative use of its rules of procedure to extend its powers. It should be recalled that the so-called ‘consultation procedure’ – the Parliament’s first faltering steps into the legislative arena – was as much a result of this imaginative use of the rules as it was a result of the Isoglucose ruling. Time and again the Parliament has effectively extended and anchored its powers through its rules of procedure. The mystery is why this phenomenon has not been studied more until now.

In his elegant and learned contribution Christopher Lord makes a simple case: ‘Overcoming asymmetries of information in what would otherwise be executive-dominated law-making requires a working parliament at the European level. The EP has filled that gap. Yet, it remains a parliament with

an unclear connection to its own public, in part because of its very success in operating as a working parliament.’ In other words, the better the Parliament does its job (as a Weberian working parliament holding a complex bureaucracy to account), the worse it does its job (as a representative parliament echoing what Habermas has termed ‘the political battles of opinions in national arenas’). Echoing the analyses of Poyet and Lyder Hermansen, Lord describes ‘the substitution of technocracy for politics’ before hinting that the answer might lie, as political philosophers from Jürgen Habermas to Luuk van Middelaar have been arguing, in a politicization of the Union.

Steffen Hurka and his colleagues point to another neglected area of study; ‘the determinants of varying numbers of outside jobs and associated ancillary income’ of MEPs. Two of their chief findings are that conservative and liberal MEPs are far more likely to have outside jobs of one sort or another and that male MEPs earn more from these outside activities than female MEPs do. But why should it be the case that the mean outside earnings of an Italian MEP are over 2,500 euros, while those of an Irish MEP are under 250 euros? Clearly, Hurka *et al* have unearthed a series of cultural phenomena that merit further study.

Edoardo Bressanelli and Nicola Chelotti examine the Parliament’s use of its new powers under the ordinary legislative procedure in the specific context of the stability and growth pact and the new rules for budgetary surveillance and macro-economic coordination (the so-called ‘Six Pack’ and ‘Two Pack’). Their clear conclusion is that the Parliament obtained very little in the process, but why? Their policy-based explanation is that Economic and Monetary Union; ‘has its own dynamics, where the member states still are the “masters”, and the EP has a more subordinate position.’ Furthermore, they speculate, ‘The EP may accept to act within boundaries defined by the states, following an informal norm of responsibility, or may be particularly sensitive to the pressure exercised by the governments via the national parties.’ The operational conclusion? More study is required!

Finally, Amie Kreppel considers the increasingly bicameral nature of the European Union, though most EU citizens would still not recognise that description. In part, that is surely because of what Kreppel describes as ‘informal bicameral asymmetry.’ As she puts it, ‘Despite increasingly equal decision-making powers within the *formal* legislative procedures, the EP is still the junior partner in the legislative game.’ Kreppel’s frank acknowledgement that her analysis does not include any data from the post-Lisbon Treaty period militates clearly in favour of further study to discover whether that junior status has remained.

From all the foregoing, it is clear that there is much still to be studied and to be understood about the European Parliament and its evolution. Perhaps what these studies also indicate is that there has been a slight shift away from interest in politics *about* the Parliament, as an institution, vis-à-vis the other institutions, towards the politics *of* the Parliament and of its actors: the members, Groups, Committees, Presidents and other office-holders. In any case, inevitably, the broad-brush studies of the post-directly-elected European Parliament’s initial surge in powers and activities have given way to more detailed and focussed studies on particular aspects of the Parliament’s development.

This set of conclusions was originally to have been penned by a good friend, Sir Julian Priestley, who sadly passed away, at the all-too-young age of 66, on 22 April 2017. He served as the European Parliament’s Secretary-General from 1997 to 2007, in what was a highly eventful period. He was the second former Secretary-General lost to the European Parliament in the recent past. Priestley’s immediate predecessor, Enrico Vinci, who also served for ten years, in what was also a highly eventful period, passed away on 17 November 2016. Between them, they covered the lion’s share of the Parliament’s post-direct elections life. The loss of such parliamentary stalwarts points to another aspect of the coming-of-age process; the fading and disappearance of an institution’s living memory. Fortunately, in 2015 Vinci was able, *inter alia*, to give a long interview to Parliament’s audio-visual

service, and so some record of his memories remains. (Vinci, 2015) Priestley, a brilliant communicator and incisive writer, was able to set out his memories and impressions in two evocative studies – *Six Battles that Shaped Europe's Parliament*, and *Europe's Parliament: People, Places and Politics*, the latter with another arch-communicator, Stephen Clark – as well as a series of recorded interviews. Priestley's successor-but-one and current incumbent, Klaus Welle, has already been setting out his views and visions in a series of remarkable written-up lecture notes published under the heading 'strategic thinking' (available on the Parliament's website).

The point is, though, that the further an institution goes and the more it grows, the more it has to look back on. Indeed, an important part of the recently-established European Parliamentary Research Service's role is, precisely, to look back and to record, through both living (interview material) and documentary (members' papers, etc) records, always in close cooperation with the European Union's Historical Archives in Florence. This increasing wealth of archival material will surely lead to another set of perspectives and another growth area in studies about the Parliament and its development; its history and the historical approach, including official histories. Already, the European Commission's team of historians is at work on the third volume of its official collective history, covering the 1986-2000 period, based precisely on interviews (former members and officials) and documentary archival material. There can be no greater sign of an institution's coming-of-age than when it starts to look back seriously on where it came from, who was there, what was achieved, and how. In that sense, the European Parliament is surely now entering a phase of maturity, but that should not be confused with stasis or stagnation, let alone decline. From the academic's point of view, the European Parliament is clearly not the only show in town, but it is still one of the most attractive and certainly the most intriguing.

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