Politics-Debates-Concepts.
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Suvi Soininen | Tuula Vaarakallio [eds.]

Challenges to Parliamentary Politics

Rhetoric, Representation and Reform

Nomos

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Challenges to Parliamentary Politics: Rhetoric, Representation and Reform

Suvi Soininen & Tuula Vaarakallio

1. Introduction

The articles that are brought together in *Challenges to Parliamentary Politics* examine the problematic of parliament as a concept, idea, phenomenon and practice. The point of departure is our contemporary situation, in which "crisis talk" is once again at the forefront of national, European, and worldwide debates regarding economics, politics, and their mutual relationship.

The contemporary sense of crisis is most prominently related to finance, but it is also associated more extensively with parliamentary politics, its institutions, representation, and even democracy. In the contemporary context, parliamentary politics and sovereignty face challenges such as the global economy and its market forces; or supranational institutions such as the IMF and international agreements such as the proposed TTIP. In this respect, it is no wonder that questions arise over whether it is right to sacrifice political and parliamentary control to institutions whose own answerability is questionable. Furthermore, it could be argued that the European Union (EU) and the fledgling European Parliament (EP) are both transforming and challenging the role of national parliaments. Parliamentary politics currently also faces criticism and distrust from its various electorates, and is under ever-growing populist pressure. Western 'liberal democracy' has plainly not achieved the point at which we can seriously proclaim the so-called 'end of history'. Rather, it is but one part in the ongoing saga of a practice that is still under development.

In short, present parliamentary systems face serious challenges which, from a politological perspective, provide fruitful grounds for further research. In this book, however, we particularly focus on the question of parliamentary and political representation, electoral distrust and the so-called democratic deficit. The low turnout for elections, and the feeling among many citizens that they are not properly represented in politics are widely discussed issues. But do these issues really reveal the failure of current po-

litical culture to represent, or is this rather the healthy response of a critical electorate. Then again, perhaps it reflects the fact that civil society is turning to different complementary forms of power instead. Countermovements may eventually enter general consciousness, but only after usually flourishing outside mainstream politics first (like the Occupy movement for instance).

The effect of the European Parliament on political representation at the national level is also quite interesting. Can parliamentary deliberation really work on the supranational EU level, or should it be limited to the nation state? In this respect, the EP can be seen not only as a successful complement to national parliaments, but also as a special kind of parliament in itself, which has its own specific role to play in democratising the EU's system of representation. Additionally, we discuss the various political versus administrative challenges that all parliamentary systems of government face and put them in a historical perspective; for example, the scarcity of parliamentary time and the governmentalisation of parliamentary agendas.

As the title suggests, many articles in the book are dealing with the challenges facing parliamentary politics in terms of political rhetoric. In this respect, rhetorical and conceptual approaches serve as a means by which the points in question can be analysed. We discuss here, for example, the notion that economics has become a precondition for political debate, so that politics, and indeed political rhetoric, have become reduced and restrained and highly economised. We also consider in more detail the precise character of parliamentary rhetoric, and how its codes also relate to the rhetoric used outside parliament.

In spite of this, the overall tone of the collection is not overtly pessimistic, as it also contains theoretical as well as more concrete ideas for reforming and strengthening parliaments and, most importantly, it reminds us of their value and strengths in this present day.

We concentrate on introducing profiled and, it is hoped, insightful views of the situation at hand. In addition, our principle has been to respect and encourage the academic freedom of each writer as far as possible. Thus we have intentionally not followed too strict a format in the editorial policy, and nor have we given each writer guidelines that might eventually prove too strict about how, what, and what not to write about. All writers in this volume are already either well-established academics and/or well-respected specialists in the topics they cover in this volume. They also come from different European countries (Finland, France, Ger-

many), and focus on political topics that are related to different national contexts. In this way, the writers have been able to accommodate a variety of perspectives that combine conceptual, rhetorical and theoretical reflections with contemporary, empirical and historical (case) studies.

The articles in this collection see parliamentary politics both, in a general sense, as a way of understanding political activity; and, more particularly, as a way of organising law-making procedures in larger human associations. They nevertheless differ in their various perspectives on subjects such as, for example, the importance that should be attached to the enemies/opponents of parliamentary politics – both outside and within 'parliamentary democracies'. This volume not only provides a self-contained discussion within, but also a well-grounded basis for further discussion and possible future research in parliamentary studies.

Diversity, *individuality*, and their undeniable connection to parliamentary history/ies are regarded here as values in themselves. This applies in spite of the demands of external (particularly economic) agents, such as multinational companies, on both parliamentary politics and, even more directly, on actual governmental policy in various states. Why should policies be reduced to a simple calculation of costs and profit, when their meaning and cultural value should, at the very least, be of equal importance? This point is particularly pertinent, as it also applies to other areas of life where these processes of measurement and control have steadily encroached, e.g., academia.

In fact, diversity of opinion and individuality correspond so essentially to the historical development of parliamentary politics, the ideas behind it, its very existence, and in some cases even its preservation, that there is a strong argument for seeing these values as necessary for a parliamentary system to revitalise itself and function properly. In fact, with a steady growth in the commodification of human culture and values, resulting in advertising, (dis)information, propaganda, environmental catastrophes, and even modern-day wars, the more difficult it becomes to entertain these values, the greater the need to protect them and the more pertinent these values become.

2. Nothing new under the sun?

Crisis talk and parliaments are by no means new acquaintances. In the United Kingdom, Parliament has faced charges of being considerably

compromised, weakened and even corrupted from (to take a fairly late instance) the Reform Act of 1867, and in some ways it has continued ever since in various contexts and in different countries. Increased suffrage and an influx of 'new' politically empowered citizens has not been seen simply as a chance to construct a 'better world', but also as threat to parliamentarism itself. The larger electorate could also be seen as a susceptible, politically 'uneducated' and thus unreliable force that might be easily manipulated. The Third Republic of France offers us a particularly good example of a situation in which there were few defenders of parliamentary government against numerous critics and their accusations of corruption. And the great disasters of 1930s where, for example, the Nazi regime gained its ultimate rise to power through parliamentary elections are another obvious case in point.

However, perhaps the biggest threat to parliamentarism that we are witnessing today is the relatively new phenomenon of economic rhetoric exercising control over all other forms of rhetoric. Politics as 'a means for choosing between different alternatives and scenarios of the future' seems to be losing its very definition, when economic prognoses and statistics seem to have the last word in most matters – sometimes resulting in open, military conflicts.

Furthermore, various European populist parties are more than ever eager to offer their 'solutions' to the political crisis, attributing it simply to faults made by the political establishment and its elite, and offering themselves instead as a viable alternative to prevailing forms of parliamentary and representative politics. Even if the turnout at the last EU elections was low, the electoral success of the populists (e.g., in France and the UK), attest to the general distrust of the electorate regarding not only the EU, but also national political establishments and their prevailing political practices. Although the success of populism is sometimes interpreted as the 'normalcy' of contemporary democracy, from the point of view of parliamentarism, populism can still be seen as its nemesis, tending as it does to simplify political decision making and to minimise political conflicts. For example, it may tend to describe what is in fact one-sided authoritarianism as a form of popular sovereignty which equates with the (direct) rule of 'the people'. While populism is calling for unanimity, parliamentarism – and democracy within it – cherishes a diversity of opinion and pluralism.

In this sense, we would like to highlight the older ideal of parliamentary politics as real deliberation and debate between individual representatives:

a model that should be revived, redeveloped and reformed. At the very least, this ideal type should remind people today that they still have a say in parliamentary politics, either through voting, more direct involvement or simply being aware that they live in a 'free' state or alliance of states such as the EU currently is.

3. About the articles

The articles in this book all address the topic of 'crisis' talk in general, as well as individual specific topics. In brief, however, the topics include a historical discussion about the claim that parliamentarism is under threat; contemporary and future trends in the EU's development; the political implications of globalisation and powerful multinational institutions (such as the IMF) over national and supranational economies; the corporatist features of so-called 'free' markets; the rise of populist movements (and their recent election victories) interpreted precisely from the viewpoint of parliamentary rhetoric; and issues of immigration and citizenship legislation within the parliamentary framework. Additionally, we discuss the level of severity for the crisis facing parliamentary politics today – and do not always agree on this issue. Yet we hope readers find these views well-argued and well-grounded enough for them to seem new and at least thought-provoking, if not even attractive.

In his article, *Parliamentarism Challenged,* Kari Palonen writes a strong historico-theoretical defence of parliamentary politics. Whilst at the same time acknowledging some of the serious challenges facing today's parliamentary politics, he nevertheless looks at them from the long-term perspective of parliamentary history to conclude that parliamentary politics *per se* is not currently in any kind of deep crisis. He uses the British case as his prime example, and reminds us that 'crisis talk' has a history in parliaments that goes back to even before the most famous British Reform Acts. Without referring to any kind of 'Golden Age' of parliamentarism however, he suggests that we be reminded of the importance of the *pro et contra* principle of debate, even in an age where party politics has long been part of the parliamentary landscape. In his Weberian style, Palonen interprets 'parliamentarism' as a political ideal type. The older challenges to parliamentarism he sees as falling into four types, and concludes by introducing two newer notions of "counter-bureaucratisation" and "inter-parliamentarisation". The latter he characterises as being largely "by-

products of the success of parliamentarisation", simultaneously noting that all human action carries the risk of unintended consequences.

The European Parliament: an Answer to Challenges Facing Parliamentarism in Europe Today? is an article in which Claudia Wiesner presents a strong defence of the parliamentary system and proposes an increase in powers for the European Parliament. She bases her argument on a comprehensive knowledge of the history of European Union, and extensive research on EU parliamentary documents both to formulate a well-grounded view of today's situation, and to forecast possible future developments for the European Parliament (EP). Wiesner stresses that the EP is a parliament "in the making", and thus, as an institution, it is trying to develop its own working practices and relationship with, not only the European Commission, but also the other significant actors at this level, now commonly referred to as the *Troika*. Wiesner argues that the European Parliament stands at a very decisive moment in history, with the very real possibility of fostering a parliamentary style of politics at a scale which, as yet, has never before been attempted.

In France, the phenomenon of anti-parliamentarism is older than the French parliamentary government itself. Anti-parliamentarism has been a constant and latent political force since the French Revolution, reaching a climax during the Third and Fourth Republics. In her article, *Republican Rationality and the Democratic Deficit of French Political Representation*, Esther Abin discusses contemporary political frustration and the crisis of representation in France, focusing on the anti-parliamentary and populist protests that followed legislation over same-sex marriage in 2013. This extensive reaction against the values and practices of the left-wing government drew attention to those who felt under-represented in parliament. Esther Abin approaches the topic by underlining the strong tradition of French republicanism, its values, and the political holism of which it is part. She claims that the holistic origins of French republicanism are even more prominent in today's presidentially oriented Fifth Republic. The result, she argues, is an ever increasing discrepancy between increasingly pluralistic France and its more holistically oriented political institutions. By framing this in the context of the political theories of Carl Schmitt and Chantal Mouffe, she goes on to propose an alternative political rationality and another form of democracy that has greater proximity and authenticity.

How citizenship is defined and who has access to it within a state depends on the very ideals of the parliamentary state in question. Legislation

over citizenship is thus a very important way for parliaments to define their ideals. In her article, *Parliamentary Politics and Migration: Reinterpreting Citizenry in the Case of Germany*, Anna Björk discusses the way citizenship is used as a legal and conceptual tool, and how it determines the limits and possibilities for political action for different groups of German citizens. She focuses specifically on three of these groups in the context of immigration laws passed from WWII up to the present day. Björk's reinterpretation of these legislative examples is from a specifically *temporal* methodological perspective, i.e., she analyses how time is incorporated into the legislation (*jus tempus*). According to her, the frenzy of measures recently taken concerning integration indicates that citizenship is one of the most interesting conceptual struggles happening in European parliamentary politics today.

In her article, *The Borderline Between Parliamentary and Extra-parliamentary Rhetoric: the Case of the Populist (True) Finns Party,* Tuula Vaarakallio approaches populism from the perspective of it being a test of tolerance for present day representative and parliamentary politics. In general terms, she discusses the nebulous borderline between MPs' parliamentary and extra-parliamentary rhetoric (e.g., on the Internet), while paying more specific attention to the case of the populist *Perussuomalaiset* party in Finland (PS). Like many European populist parties, the PS have been pushing at the limits of tolerance within parliamentary politics by, for example, showing unparliamentary conduct within, or by using harsh rhetoric outside. They have thus succeeded in eliciting a response and consequently reprimanded for their rhetoric. The article claims that a heuristic division between parliamentary and extra-parliamentary rhetoric can make the boundary between acceptable and unacceptable political rhetoric more tangible. It also raises the thorny question of whether the rules that regulate parliamentary conduct should also govern MP's extra-parliamentary language and behaviour as well.

Hanna Kallio examines the increasingly disproportionate amount of parliamentary time devoted to purely economic matters in her article *Parliamentary Politics, Rhetoric and Means of Talking about Economic Policy*. By examining examples of Finland's economic policy especially from during their 1990s recession, and drawing on insights from economic and political theory, she proposes that the formation of economic policies require a wider parliamentary debate of other value systems than the purely economic. She examines why nevertheless economic issues are often simply seen as being observable 'facts', which somehow makes them seem

more objective than other political issues. Because of this, not many questions are then asked about prevailing economic arrangements, even if they seem to be limiting the options that are chosen for debate in parliament and elsewhere. She thus argues for a more open and conscious discussion of values, and for a wider range of economic theories to be discussed in parliamentary institutions. This ultimately questions the current importance attached to a narrow economic view in recent power struggles.

In the concluding article, *Defending Parliamentary Politics and Individual Freedom in a Disillusioned World*, Suvi Soininen suggests that a certain amount of distrust towards prevailing political systems is well-grounded. Yet, she simultaneously reminds us that modern politics has always been ambiguous in character. Drawing on Michael Oakeshott's oeuvre in particular, Soininen claims that civil association is one way to arrange legislation that is worth considering. And because it is on a conceptual par with the practical level of parliamentary politics, it should also be considered a valid form of political activity in today's world. From a parliamentary perspective however, Soininen sees current economic and political systems to be on the verge of becoming dystopias, with an overall increase in different kinds of surveillance mechanisms. Constraining phenomena such as subliminal stimulation, over-medicalisation, and an increase in the concentration of power (e.g., media ownership) are cited as being detrimental to the enterprise association style of understanding political activity. Leaning on older interpretations of Niccoló Machiavelli, like the one presented by Isaiah Berlin, and by some theorists of mass democracy, Soininen ultimately shows that different understandings of freedom and security still, at least in Western countries, contain the seeds of Judeo-Christian morals. Morality and politics are seen as being intertwined in very basic ways, and the real question now is how can we conceive our own individuality and is this even possible without first acknowledging the value of being an individual on equal terms with everyone else?

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