

## Conference report

### **Parliaments and Methodology. Anthropological, Discourse-Oriented and Digital Approaches to Parliamentary History**

**Helsinki and Jyväskylä 12-14 June 2014**

3<sup>rd</sup> European Information and Research Network on Parliamentary History (EuParl.net) Conference / 9<sup>th</sup> Annual Jyväskylä Symposium on Political Thought and Conceptual History (1)

During the third international conference of the European Information and Research Network on Parliamentary History (EuParl.net) 45 experts on European parliamentary studies from various academic fields gathered to present, discuss and rethink their latest methodological approaches. Special attention was paid to anthropological, discourse-oriented and oral history approaches to parliamentary institutions, likewise to the implications of the digitalization of parliamentary records. The conference was organized by the Department of History and Ethnology of the University of Jyväskylä, EuParl.net and the Finnish Historical Society under the supervision of Pasi Ihalainen. The opening of the conference was in the *Pikkuparlamentti* Building (Little Parliament) in Helsinki, which is a part of the Parliament of Finland *Eduskunta*. The Speaker, Eero Heinäluoma, had accepted the invitation to give the opening speech of the conference.

#### **Digitalization of parliamentary records**

The first theme to be addressed at the conference was the digitalization of parliamentary records. In Finland, this process is not at an advanced stage and funds are lacking to improve this condition. Therefore the organizer, Pasi Ihalainen expressed interest in learning from the experiences of other countries to find solutions for the Finnish situation. The conference provided important insights, as speakers from various countries described their experiences.

Adrian Brown of the Parliamentary Archives in London, presented an overview of the developments and future plans in the United Kingdom. Here, ambitious aims include the digitalization of audiovisual records, the creation of cross-references between different archives and the introduction of online geographical information on the location of different records in the United Kingdom. The work is to be carried out by organizations in the public sector as well as external partners such as private companies.

Johan van Merriënboer, Centre for Parliamentary History in Nijmegen, talked about the limitations and possibilities of Dutch parliamentary records for historical research. He presented practical information about the use of the search engine, concentrating on the experiences of the user. Merriënboer also addressed the problem of differences between the recording of the debate and the words actually spoken in parliament and emphasized that historians should also make use of contextual sources. Finally, he mentioned the different national political cultures which challenge cross-national comparisons. Marnix Beyen, University of Antwerp, also referred to the impact of the national political culture on digitalization. In Belgium, this meant that the emphasis was on having the publications in printed format. As a result, the Belgian state was reluctant to expand the availability of sources with online publication. The digitalization of a selection of parliamentary

records therefore had to be undertaken with very limited resources. Nevertheless a useful database with search ability was established in the Belgian case.

In Norway a small scale pilot project combined with the hundredth anniversary of Norway's independence provided sufficient resources to accomplish a major digitalization project. Egil Borlaug and Odd Harald Kvammen of the Parliamentary Archive in the Norwegian parliament, the *Stortinget* recounted their experiences and introduced the new database and its search abilities.

In contrast to Norway, the situation in Sweden is somewhat unsatisfactory, as was made clear by Jonas Harvard of the Mid-Sweden University. A digitization project had started, but could not be completed. Documents had been scanned, but were not put online because the project ran out of resources. Harvard called for support for a new project to continue the work.

Other speakers discussed experiences in Hungary and Slovenia, when the conference reached the city of Jyväskylä on 13 June. The sessions were held at the Department of History and Ethnology of the University of Jyväskylä. Tamás Dobszay of Eötvös Loránd University described the Hungarian context, where the digitalization had made many key parliamentary records available online. In the future, special attention was to be paid to the records of the nineteenth century. Later, Jure Gašparič of the Institute of Contemporary History in Ljubljana discussed the problems occasioned by different alphabets in the Slovenian parliamentary records. Different alphabets limit the possibilities to conduct operations that are feasible in online databases, such as searches with specific entries.

The presentations made clear that the digitalization of parliamentary records varies between different countries when it comes to the speed and ambition of the digitalization plans. In the Belgian case a small-scale project was accomplished without governmental help and with very limited resources. In contrast, in the United Kingdom the digitalization process is constantly advancing and it is planned to extend to new types of sources. What is lacking is a large international structure in which different countries could co-operate to promote digitalization. In every country projects are carried out as national undertakings. EuParl.net coordinator Margit van der Steen suggested that the scholarly community should play a role in strengthening the co-operation between the digitization projects in the different countries.

Another conclusion was that historians and members of parliamentary archives are already looking beyond the current phase of digitalization. At the moment, the usual solution to gain online access to a document is to scan the document with optical character recognition (OCR) software and to publish the document in a database that has search ability. As a result, researchers often have access to a document in a portable document format (pdf) or to the text of the source. However, there are often multiple databases, each dealing with different collections of sources. As digitalization advances, the question emerges if different records and types of sources can be linked to each other by means of cross-referencing. If this could be realized, it would make it possible to have a record of parliamentary debates including cross-references to audiovisual records, newspaper articles or other recorded pieces of culture that offer readers additional information. This would help researchers contextualizing their topics and would moreover be useful to a wider audience. The question remains whether and when this level of online access can be achieved, but it is clear that this is the future direction.

### **Anthropological approaches to parliamentary history**

After discussing the problems and challenges of the digitization of parliamentary records, anthropological approaches to parliamentary history were discussed by Shirin Rai of Warwick University, and Emma Crewe of the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London. Rai's presentation was based on a large comparative research project focusing on gendered ceremonies and rituals in parliaments the United Kingdom, South Africa and India. She emphasized the political relevance of ceremonies and rituals which can be used to study institutions such as parliaments. Crewe gave a lively presentation on her anthropological research in the British House of Lords and in the British House of Commons.

The two scholars demonstrated that an anthropological approach can provide a more vivid picture of parliaments than can be achieved, for example, through the analysis of written sources. Their presentations also allowed for some methodological conclusions. In enabling national comparisons digitized source material is very useful. Attention should be paid to finding points of reference between different political cultures. In a comparative study, it may be beneficial to use methodological guidelines not very strictly. Also, the anthropological approach constantly reminds researchers that apart from the textual analysis of written sources, important findings can be made by exposing oneself as a researcher to the institution, its members and its culture. Personal and sufficiently long-term participation creates opportunities to discover key factors in institutions, helping to locate the right persons for interviews, and leads to opportunities to examine at first hand the parliament and its members.

### **Oral history**

It is not only the anthropological approach that provides verbalized information on parliaments. Oral history projects are conducted in many countries, as demonstrated by Donald A. Ritchie of the United States Senate, Paul Seaward of the History of Parliament Trust in London and Joni Krekola of the Library of the Finnish Parliament. Ritchie made clear that oral history projects are able to produce an eyewitness account of different key events in political history and of the lives of politicians, and as such constitute a valuable addition to the written records. In Finland, interviews with veteran MPs produced new insights on life in the Parliament of Finland. Methodologically, oral history can be challenging and may be related to the question of resources in addition to the usual challenges of studying political speaking and action. To conduct interviews on a large scale is time consuming, and, if conducted by volunteers, as is the case in the United Kingdom, the quality of interviews may be decidedly uneven.

### **Discourse-oriented approaches**

The majority of the presentations, fourteen altogether, focused on the study of language in parliamentary environments. Henk Te Velde of Leiden University gave the first presentation on this theme. To understand what politics is about, he compared parliamentary politics to theatre, using examples from Great Britain, France and the Netherlands. Parliament connects members of the public and members of the political elites. By using the metaphor of the theatre, our understanding of the attitudes, power and influence parliaments are considered to represent can be enhanced. Te

Velde also underlined the benefits of international comparative research: studying the British and French parliaments enabled him to better understand the Dutch situation.

Timo Turja of the Library of the Finnish Parliament spoke about references to literature in Finnish parliamentary discourse and concluded that speakers in parliamentary forums benefit from including references to literature, such as religious works.

On Saturday, the final day of the conference, Pasi Ihalainen and Taina Saarinen of the University of Jyväskylä presented their ideas on studying political language as multi-sited discourses. In their view, political language consists of different political discourses that are on-going simultaneously in different forums with different audiences. Their approach combines the micro-level individual use of language with the macro-level semantic changes and can help, for example, to study transnational movements of ideas. It moreover links the understanding of discourse in historiography to linguistic approaches of discourses, thereby strengthening the current methodology for the analysis of political language.

Eero Voutilainen of the Finnish Parliament gave an interesting insight into the making of the Finnish parliamentary records, speaking among others about the guidelines used for editing. The methodological message for researchers was clear: parliamentary records should not only be considered from the perspective of political actions, but the processes of the production of the records should also be taken into account. In line with Voutilainen's linguistic approach, Harm Kaal of Radboud University in Nijmegen presented an empirical case, talking about linguistic battles in Dutch party politics in the period 1967–1980 and how it embedded religious messages.

In other presentations of the day, Antonin Durand of the *École normale supérieure* and the University of Bologna talked about members of the French and Italian parliaments in late nineteenth and early twentieth-century contexts who were mathematicians. He showed that members with a background as a scientist had major potential to influence the decision-making because of their credibility and status. Durand warned his audience not to overemphasize the usefulness of digitalized source material, especially if only part of the sources is available on line. Traditional archival work continues to be a basic premise for historiographical research. In the same session, Teemu Häkkinen of the University of Jyväskylä presented his case study on British parliamentary discourse. He examined how the role of parliament in decisions concerning the deployment of the armed forces gradually changed and what kind of conceptual and constitutional implications this had. Häkkinen advocated an approach that uses linguistic aspects in the use of concepts as a way to pinpoint or search for the key events in political discussion.

Tobias Weidner of the Georg-August University Göttingen used the opportunity to describe the state of the art of political history research in Germany. Research focuses strongly on the concept of communication. This umbrella term covers topics such as rituals and discourse analysis. In parliamentary history the emphasis is currently on communication spaces within parliamentary environments. In addition to the study of parliamentary history, Weidner voiced the need to study the history of the political and to differentiate this study from the history of politics; the main reason for this is the historicization of the political with different boundary-shifts taking place at different moments in history. Methodologically, the differentiation would produce a more systematic approach with more focused questions.

Kristoffer Klammar, Bielefeld University, talked about economic crisis discourses and their effect on parliamentary communication in the German *Bundestag* with reference to two case studies. He analysed the topoi of discourses, linguistic attitudes such as the use of key words and the general characteristics of political communication. His research showed that political communication in the German *Bundestag* modified in the face of crisis interpretations made in other forums than in the *Bundestag*, for instance through the acceleration of parliamentary procedures.

In the discourse-oriented sessions, four papers were related to political theory. Kari Palonen, Taru Haapala and Tuula Vaarakallio representing the University of Jyväskylä and Claudia Wiesner of Bochum University gave presentations on the various uses of parliamentary forums for political analysis. Palonen discussed his new book on the parliamentarisation of deliberative rhetoric in Westminster which is to be published in autumn 2014. This new research sheds light on how political oratory evolved towards debate during the nineteenth century. Taru Haapala's presentation showed that in addition to legislative institutions, there are also other organizations which have a political culture with parliamentary tendencies. She had analysed the debating societies of the universities of Oxford and Cambridge in the nineteenth century and argued that a process was under way that transformed these societies into training grounds for parliamentarians; a process that started to feature procedures and topics taken from the parliament at Westminster.

When it came to conceptual politics in the European Union, Wiesner analysed the relations between political thought and political practice by combining macro-level conceptual analysis and micro-level individual uses of words. She used key political concepts as pivots and indicators of political and social changes. According to Wiesner, this is a relevant approach since European integration involves conceptual debates and struggles on all levels of the European Union.

As the last presentation of the conference, Vaarakallio called the audience's attention to the challenges posed by populist parliamentary parties to parliamentary institutions. She analysed the populist (True) Finns Party that had emerged as a major political force on the Finnish political landscape in recent. As the presentation and the following discussion showed, parliaments in different national contexts react differently to populist parties. In Finland the attempts of populist MPs to undermine parliamentary rules have led to the strengthening of existing parliamentary culture; this is not the case in some other European countries. The discussion called for comparative studies in this field.

To conclude, the sessions on discourse-oriented approaches showed that the combination of long-term macro-level change and individual use of language is currently a popular field of research. Concepts are used, for example, to identify crucial changes in the political landscape and in relations between speaking and action. Speaking in parliamentary forums as such is considered a useful research theme, because it adds to our current knowledge of the political.

As a whole, the sessions on different methodological approaches reminded researchers that parliaments can and should be studied in multiple ways. The use of different methods needs to be connected to the availability and accessibility of different sources. Both the users of sources and the creators of these sources should continue to interact with each other, not only on a national but also on an international level. Pasi Ihalainen expressed the wish that EuParl.net provide the structure to

discuss different methodological approaches and as such, emphasized the need for more conferences in the future. As a substantial contribution to the methodological discussion, Ihalainen suggested compiling a volume based on the presentations given at the conference.

On Saturday evening the conference ended with a summer evening cruise on Lake Päijänne.

Throughout the conference the weather had been of a freshness calculated to keep the participants indoors in the sessions, but as the conference drew to a close the participants were rewarded with fair climes indeed.

- (1) The conference was financed by the Department of History and Ethnology at the University of Jyväskylä, the Finnish Federation for Learned Societies, and the Netherlands Organization for Scientific Research and the Finnish Historical Society and sponsored by the Finnish Parliament, the Norwegian Parliament, the United States Senate and the British, Dutch and German institutes of parliamentary history.

Teemu Häkkinen