



UACES 49th Annual Conference

Lisbon, 1-4 September 2019

Panel 912: Remembering Europe - Education, Identity and Policy

Wednesday, 04/Sep/2019: 11:30am - 1:00pm

Chair: Larisa Deriglazova, Tomsk State University

Collecting Memories: the Evolution of the European Parliament as seen by Former MEPs

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The following is not a formal research paper but an informal summary of our presentation on the Collecting Memories project and of a forthcoming book on the main themes covered in the interviews. This will be published as a Palgrave Pivot publication, probably in October.

Introduction

Oral History has a tradition in the European Institutions. The Historical Archives of the European Union (HAEU) have a large number of oral histories consisting of interviews with Commissioners and Commission officials and with leaders of EU institutions, including those who had worked with Jean Monnet. The Parliament itself has carried out interviews with its past Presidents and Secretary-Generals.

The project, Collecting memories, was developed under the umbrella of the Historical Archives of the European Union (HAEU) and with the active cooperation of the Former Members (of the EP) Association (FMA). It has the ambition of following a less institutional path to collect the personal memories of former Members of the European Parliament who have assisted, contributed and even influenced the course of the European project so as to give a broader picture. We collected the views not just of Parliament's top leaders but also of its backbenchers and not only of MEPs recently in the institution but also those who have been present throughout the 40 years, since direct elections.

As one of our interviewees told us, *it is rare that individual MEPs have a direct personal effect on the EU but they have contributed to a collective effort, which constitutes the output of the Parliament.* These memories of active MEPs are then intertwined with personal comments and anecdotes that have made our work particularly attractive and interesting.

The approaching of the 40th anniversary of the first direct election of the European Parliament offered the perfect opportunity to look back at what the Parliament has and has not achieved over the last four decades and how its Members have contributed to the creation of a unique model of parliamentary democracy at the European level.

History is never an end-to-end exercise; these interviews offer material to reflect on the evolution of the European Union. These contributions are particularly relevant in times when the need to reform the functioning of the Institutions is rising in a large part of public opinion.

The outcome of this project has been to build up a database, deposited in the Historical Archives of the EU, in Florence. The HAEU offers a long-term provision for public access to these interviews to the scholarly community as part of its oral history platform. The considerable and still growing set of interviews will therefore be available to the public alongside other oral history projects related to European institutions and broadly to the history of European integration.

We are also preparing a short book describing 10 of the key themes that have emerged during our interviews.

Two elements have to be kept in mind about this project. First it is self-financed project: we have exploited all the possibilities to meet and talk with MEPs, mostly in person but sometimes also by phone. This reflects on the quality of the audio, sometimes you can hear tea or coffee served or telephones ringing, which make the audio more lively. Secondly, the Members volunteered to be interviewed, which makes a random geographical and political balance, but it has the advantage of particular enthusiasm in the MEPs' storytelling.

The aim of this project has not been to compete with the many academic analyses of the European Parliament, but rather to offer an insiders' view of the evolution of the institution based on personal experiences, which in our view, is an essential complement to the literature on the history of the Parliament and its role in European integration.

In itself, it does not constitute new research but we believe that it does provide valuable pointers for researchers on the EP in many different fields.

Background to project

Time to take stock : 40 years of directly-elected EP

It is now 40 years since the election of the first directly elected Parliament. As recent research has shown (for example. the recent doctoral thesis of Mechthild Roos of the University of Augsburg) the old nominated EP had developed considerably before 1979. In particular the evolution of its budgetary powers, (two studies of the EP focus on the evolution of budgetary powers from 1952 to 1979) and it had also been proactive in certain fields, such as on social policy.

There is no doubt, however, that direct elections constituted an immediate and major change:

-a new sense of direction and purpose for the Parliament, which felt that it had a new mandate and new legitimacy

-creation of a new class of European politicians separate from national parliamentarians: at first, many of the directly-elected MEPs had extensive national experience and a good number still had double mandates but gradually this declined and now dual mandates are formally forbidden. Some of these new MEPs saw their time in the EP as part of a wider political career or even as a brief transition before returning to more important national politics, but others saw their time in the EP as a career in its own right. Moreover, many of those who were not European federalists or who had come to the EP without a driving sense of European idealism became enthusiastic about this extraordinary democratic experiment of working together with so many political groups and nationalities and of working together in a spirit of cooperation and compromise often lacking in their own domestic political cultures.

It is easy to forget that the new directly-elected Parliament had so few formal powers. It immediately sought to assert those that it did have by rejecting the annual budget but in other

areas, such as its legislative powers, these were no greater than those of the Economic and Social Committee. In the period covered by the interviews this situation has completely changed and the European Parliament is now a co-legislator in almost all areas: it has to give its assent on a whole range of international agreements as well as on enlargement, plays a varied but often key role on EU nominations, and has a much greater role than before on any EU Treaty change.

During this period the EP has had to react to and, in some cases, helped to shape a number of historic events and processes: the building of the Single Market, the introduction of the Euro, the fall of the Berlin Wall and EU enlargement, the resignation of the Santer Commission, the negotiations of new EU treaties and their initial rejection in certain Member States, and most recently the Brexit referendum in the UK.

Finally over these 40 years the EP has not only become more powerful but also much larger and even more multinational and multilingual. It has also seen many organisational changes. More intangibly it has also seen internal cultural changes.

The actors of the Collecting memories project

The almost 100 MEPs we have interviewed, so far, are the real actors of our project: 23 interviewees were in the 1979-84 EP and 34 in the 1984-89 one, rising to 54 in the 1989-94 one. In total 70 men and 29 women were interviewed.

The interviews cover MEPs who have all volunteered to be interviewed. There are fewer Eurosceptics and more recent MEPs. There are some who did not like their time in the EP. Some nationalities and political groups are much better represented than others.

As far as nationalities: UK(31), Germany (20)and Italy (13) are best represented; there are also a good number of French(7), Spanish(6), Irish(5) and Dutch(8); there are fewer Danes(2), Belgians(3), and Luxembourgers(2); there is only one Bulgarian and only one Hungarian.

Concerning Political groups, the best represented ones are EPP(25), Socialists(41) and ALDE(16). There are also members from GUE(4), Greens(7), UEN(1), EDG (6), ECR(3). There is one from a Eurosceptic group. The far right is not represented

Among the interviewees we have a large number of Office-holders: 7 EP Presidents, 3 VPs, 3 Quaestors, 14 Presidents of political groups, 31 Committee Chairs, and also group whips, coordinators, and key rapporteurs.

Our methodology

The aim of the project has not been to compete with academic analyses of the European Parliament. Rather we have wanted to complement these analyses and to facilitate future research by looking at the history, evolution and character of the EP through the personal perspectives of its former MEPs.

Most interviews are in English, although a minority are in French, Italian and Spanish. A number have also filled in written questionnaires. The interviews were mainly conducted face-to-face but a minority were carried out over the phone.

First, we sent former members a questionnaire inviting them to answer a series of questions about their experience inside the institution. Not all members wanted to fill out this questionnaire and we did not make it a pre-condition for making an interview. However, the written material provided often constituted a starting point for the subsequent interview. The questionnaires that were completed will be located in the archive alongside the interviews.

Second, the interviews themselves normally follow a similar pattern: you will hear the same kind of questions being asked by all five interviewers, although the emphasis given by each interviewee to each question does vary greatly. The interviews also vary greatly in length, with the interviewees sometimes going backwards and forwards between specific themes. To facilitate researchers we have tried, with the help of Maastricht University students, to provide indications as to which main theme is covered in which part of the interview. This guide is being annexed to the archive.

The completed interviews are not being edited or redacted, so that they retain their spontaneity and also best reflect the personality of the interviewee. There have been advantages and disadvantages in our approach, but one of the key strengths of the project has been our personal bond with many of the interviewees, which permitted informality and a flexible and conversational style.

The interviews are only available in oral form and the project team has not had the resources to provide written transcripts. Therefore, the replies to the questionnaire mentioned above are the only written element and they were only completed by a minority of the interviewees.

Access to the archive

A final word about access to the archive. The considerable and still growing set of interviews will be available to the public alongside other oral history projects related to European institutions and broadly to the history of European integration.

You will find the website at: https://archives.eui.eu/en/oral_history#CM_EP

You can also go into Historical Archives of the European Union (HAEU), Oral histories, Collecting Memories. The accompanying responses to the questionnaires are not yet available, but they will be at some stage.

The archive will also be complemented by a book where each chapter has as its author one of the five of us who did the interviews, all with somewhat different styles and approaches (as in all edited volumes). All the chapters, however, follow two simple rules:

- the stories we tell in the chapters are based on the memories that we have collected (and not, for example, our own memories); and
- members are not quoted directly by name but we put material in italics that is taken from an interview or questionnaire and, in some cases, is presented in our own words.

Anecdotes and story-telling

As mentioned before, the value of the archive lies not just in the rich variety of subjects covered but also in the anecdotes, as well as personal impressions of everyday life in the Parliament, in the groups, committees and delegations and in the interaction with other European nationalities and cultures, as well as a set of very personal and often subjective descriptions of how some key events occurred .

These descriptions range from that provided by the MEP who turned up to work in Brussels for the first time at the offices of the Commission rather than at the Parliament; to that of another first-time MEP who was told that he had been nominated as a Committee chair without even being consulted; to another who travelled to Mexico with the Spanish King (he representing the peoples of Europe and the King the people of Spain!); round to another's Eureka moment on a forest walk that the problems with the Santer Commission were not ones of narrow accountancy but of lack of accountability. What comes across in so many of the interviews is the special and unusual culture of the European Parliament and the enjoyment that so many of the former MEPs have drawn from being part of this multinational and multicultural experiment.

Main themes covered in the interviews.

Ten themes

Two initial observations. This is a people-driven approach to the history of the EP and much of its value lies in the personal anecdotes and impressions of our interviewees, often very interesting in their own right and not susceptible to easy classification by theme. Moreover many of the interviews jump from subject to subject and attempts to put them into a rigid framework often encounter great difficulties. Having said that, as pointed out above, we have tried to identify the main themes that are covered by the interviews. These will be described in more detail in our forthcoming book, along with an indication for scholars as to which themes are covered in which interview, and, if possible, where.

There are ten main themes, and each component of the project team has been responsible for preparing two of the chapters.

- Choosing the Parliament
- Working inside the Parliament machine
- Living inside political groups
- Playing a part at major moments
- Shaping and influencing policy
- Scrutinizing and holding to account
- Making a mark beyond the EU
- Communicating the work of the Parliament
- Keeping in touch with national societies
- Looking to the future

The specific themes in more detail and their relations with the present times

Choosing the Parliament

Most interviewees were asked how they came to be elected to the EP, their personal and professional backgrounds, whether they were full-time politicians or first-timers, their prior knowledge of the EU and even whether they ended up in the EP by European conviction or more by accident.

Related to this, we also asked them for their first impressions of the European Parliament, their first impressions of a multinational and multilingual parliament, the ways they adapted to an often-unfamiliar culture of compromise and consensus and their relative autonomy compared to national parliamentarians, a feature of the EP, which was particularly appreciated by many of the interviewees. Many also emphasised how much they enjoyed the multinational character of the EP, even some of those who were Eurosceptic by nature. There are also some very valuable interviews of what it was like to be in the first directly elected Parliament in 1979.

The last European elections had the highest turnout in 20 years; more than 50% took part in the elections. This high turnout increases the representativeness of MEPs and the awareness of citizens that their vote can change the direction of Europe. As the EP becomes more political, the research for consensus and compromises might become more difficult. Will this translate in a reduction of the EP's influence in favor of the EU's second Chamber: the Council?

Another characteristic of the 2019 elections is the highest turnover of MEPs in the EP history, more than 60%. Without knowing the individual reasons that have led to the election of individual MEPs, this 'generation' of newly elected MEPs, will benefit less from the experience of long standing MEPs, but the first time elected MEPs might introduce a new approach to value more the work of the EP.

Working inside the Parliament machine

Under this heading, the interviews explored how individual MEPs sought to go about setting their political priorities and then learning to be effective within the complex and unfamiliar European Parliament "machine".

A second matter covered under this heading related to the experiences of those who took on leadership positions within the institution, such as President, Vice-President, Quaestor and Committee Chair. In our view particularly interesting insights were provided on the unfamiliar role of Quaestor on which there were very different perspectives from a number of the interviewees.

After the 2019 elections, the period between accreditation and the appointment to the most relevant positions was relatively short and negotiations were in the hands of the leadership of the different political groups. Newly elected MEPs, who represent more than 60%, remain far below this figure: 29% of EP Vice Presidents are newly elected, 20% of Quaestors and 25% of Committee Chairs. This confirms what many interviewees told us, i.e., getting hold of the complex European Parliament machine is a long exercise.

Living inside political groups

Political groups are such a key feature of the EP that it is unsurprising that most of the interviewees give their impressions of their own groups, of the significance of the groups in the everyday life of the Parliament and of the power relationship between the groups and within the Conference of Presidents, the key decision-making organ within the EP. There are also

many interesting insights into leadership structures within the groups, the role of group whips and national delegation leaders and the vital part played by the political group coordinators within each of the Committees.

One of the features of the 2019 elections has been a certain discontinuity in the composition of political groups and consequently on the formation of a solid qualified majority capable to influence the key decisions of the EU. The central role of political groups, which appeared in the interviews, has been confirmed. It is worthwhile to mention:

- a) The importance of the size of the group to obtain most of the key positions: in some case, groups have preferred number to ideological coherence;
- b) The importance of cooperation among groups, to define a hard core of the strategic objectives to pursue during the term. This cooperation leads to the majority which will influence all important decisions.

The creation of a solid majority is one of the major issues of this term, in contrast with all the previous 40 years when the two major groups were able to find a common denominator to carry out the responsibilities linked to each term. The narrow close majority with which the proposed President of the Commission was elected by the EP is a sign of the difficulties to create, during this term, a clear and solid majority.

In contrast, a clear and solid majority has been expressed to avoid that the nationalist group, Identity and Democracy, obtain relevant positions in the EP governing body.

Playing a part at major moments

One of the richest aspects of the archive relates to the interviewees impressions of some of the important moments in the Parliament's history, and of the rapid institutional development of the EP through the eyes of MEPs who lived through the period and were active participants either as leaders or as foot-soldiers. Among the many matters discussed are the rejection of the budget in 1979 and 1984, the Spinelli initiative, the establishment of the 1992 Single Market Programme, the 2004 enlargement, the Treaty changes that increased the Parliament's role from the Single European Act in 1987 to the Lisbon Treaty in 2009 as well as setbacks such as the failure to obtain a single seat. Inter alia, there are particularly vivid descriptions of the role of Altiero Spinelli, the Parliament's role in the fall of the Santer Commission, MEPs experiences of the Constitutional Convention and of Francois Mitterrand's last speech to the European Parliament, mentioned by many interviewees, notably his concluding comment that "nationalism means war".

Many interviewees mentioned the introduction of the Spitzenkandidaten exercise to increase EU democratic accountability. One of the first acts of the 9th term Parliament was the election of the candidate for President of the Commission, proposed by the European Council, without taking into account the nominees designated by the European political parties

The absence of a strong and solid majority of EP political groups favoured this change of approach. Time will tell us whether the attempt to make the EU top jobs more democratic is definitely abandoned or if a dynamic for a new procedure, agreed by all Institutions could be agreed upon during this parliamentary term.

Shaping and influencing policy

Many of the interviews cover Parliament's increasing role in shaping and influencing EU policy both through using its growing formal competences and by more informal mechanisms. The path from limited budgetary powers at the end of the 70s to full co-decision with the Lisbon Treaty is also discussed, as are a number of concrete examples of the Parliament seeking to use its new-found influence in negotiations with the Council and Commission on such key legislative topics as the REACH and Services Directives.

Interviews have highlighted how a solid majority and a capacity to compromise is necessary to shape a legislation. The hearings of the candidate-Commissioners would be the first opportunity to shape the political agenda in the various areas. MEPs will seek to commit the candidate-Commissioners to the political priorities defined by the majority of the EP. The EP will try not only to influence the legislation but to define the political agenda for the next years.

Scrutinizing and holding to account

A number of the interviews also discuss the less publicised subject of the rise of European Parliament oversight over the EU's executive bodies. The fall of the Santer Commission is again described in detail as is the development of the EP's role in the EU appointment process. In this context there are valuable descriptions of Parliament's introduction of confirmation hearings for individual Commissioners, not provided for by any formal EU text and introduced in spite of the opposition of Jacques Delors, the outgoing Commission President.

Making a mark beyond the EU

The European Parliament's formal role in external affairs is more limited than in the internal sphere but the EP has increasingly been able to leverage its role on the EU budget, give its consent on many EU international agreements, and carve out a more important niche for itself. In addition the Parliament has developed an important informal role in inter-parliamentary diplomacy, on development issues, on promoting human rights and in monitoring political crises and conflicts around the world. The interviews cover all these points and there are very interesting and sometimes critical discussions on, for example, the EP's work on election observation and peace and reconciliation in such areas as Sri Lanka and Kashmir. Moreover, all MEPs are members of inter-parliamentary delegations and many interviewees discuss their experiences in this context, as well as the links between this and their own constituency concerns.

The 2019 elections took place in a new geopolitical environment. For the first time, the United States and the Republic of Russia have expressed their open opposition to the European project, without mentioning the allegations of influencing the results of the vote through social media or financing to anti-European parties.

Communicating the work of the Parliament

Almost all of the interviews raise the problem of how best to communicate Europe to an occasionally hostile and often indifferent public opinion within their own member state and within Europe more generally. Many interviewees describe how they sought to keep in contact with their national and local media and in publicising their work to their constituents. A familiar refrain was the lack of interest usually taken in their work in Brussels and in Strasbourg.

Keeping in touch with national societies

All the interviewees were asked about their work at home, about their work within their constituency and their links with civil society and with concerned interest groups. The interviewees also cover their relations with their own national governments as well as with regional and local governments, with national parliaments and with the MEP's own national party. In some cases, these were good but in many others either weak or non-existent, with one interviewee, a former national parliamentarian, even describing his experience in the EP as being like a parachutist dropped and then forgotten behind enemy lines. The interviews also show the great range of differences between individual countries, even on such fundamental matters as the definition of their own constituency, in some cases national and in others regional or even more local. One rich feature of the archive, for example, is the description by a number of UK interviewees of the implications of the 1999 Tony Blair-led shift from individual first-past-the-post constituencies to closed list regional constituencies.

As most of the interviews have highlighted the difficulties of communicating their work to public opinion, the campaign for the 2019 elections has been marked by a regain of interest of the public opinion in European affairs. European issues have been on the front page of national media, most of which have underlined the link between Europe and domestic affairs. The large use of social media has also played a crucial role in the last years, and, generally public opinion has been more aware of the, positive and negative, implications of the European project.. The challenge, for the new Parliament and its MEPs, will be how to build communication with their national societies to demonstrate how EP decisions have a direct impact on the everyday life of European Citizens.

Looking to the future

A final element covered by the vast majority of the interviewees are their views both on the future direction of the EU as a whole and on the European Parliament more specifically. The interviews present the contrast between the often optimistic views of the future as seen by the EP after 1979 and the more problematic outlook which faces new members after the 2019 elections. There is no longer the automatic assumption that what has been achieved by the Parliament over 40 years in furthering integration will necessarily be sustained. The responses of former MEPs to this change can be categorised respectively as optimistic, pessimistic or pragmatic, with the latter often cautious but still believing that the EP is "doomed to succeed".

A final subplot of the archive relates to the interviewees views on Brexit. As there are a considerable number of former UK MEPs covered by the project almost all of their interviews discuss their views on the subject, but it is also raised by some non-UK interviewees as well.

Members of the 2019 EP, will have the opportunity to enhance democracy and accountability into the European bubble and balance the intergovernmental approach and to maintain a solid link with their domestic public opinion and give direction to adapt the course of the European project towards the new ambitions of the post 2020 challenges.

Conclusions

No conventional conclusions are possible from an exercise of this kind except to point out that our project is an open project, the oral history of the European Parliament should continue to develop further. In this contest, we would like memories of MEPs to be collected at the end of each term to highlight key moments and we are planning to launch this second phase of our project. But our ambition is to extend the number of researchers who would like to be part of the next phase of this project. We are ready to offer guidance.