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Politicising the Union ? Indeed, but how ?

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Simon Hix's determination and steadfastness deserve our admiration. For close on ten years now, he has sustained, contrary to accepted thinking, his demonstration that the European Union is not as unique as is claimed and that the democratic deficit it suffers, real though it be, is not inescapable. Having designed, then conducted a vast research programme on the political leanings of European elected representatives, he proposes to demonstrate that the politicisation formulae we are familiar with – those of our national partisan systems – are also at work in the Union, and more specifically in its Parliament. On which basis there is nothing to stop us thinking that the Union could one day resolve its democratic problem: if the politicisation of the issues at stake is what enables citizens to own the policies, and if it is astir in the Union, all it needs is visibility.

His approach has the merit to remind us, in contrast with an oft-quoted argument, that the Union's legitimacy does not rely only on the policies it yields but also on the manner in which it generates them. If citizens do not see how they can inflect the course of European decisions, they have every right to consider the European democratic deficit a very real problem.

It is somewhat harder to follow Simon Hix in his praise for the virtues of public deliberation. The example he quotes of the Bolkestein Directive gives pause for thought: the idea that hostility to this text can be explained by the fact that "Citizens' views on this issue are soft and easily manipulated by vested interests, such as public enterprises and nationalistic newspapers" and that debating it could solve the problem since "If there was a more open political debate on this issue, voters would learn that the proposed directive is not as radical as some of the opponents claim and also that liberalising the service sector is more likely to create jobs than erode jobs", suggests a perhaps fanciful view of political argument. Simon Hix acts as if, in politics, there were only honest representatives and nasty corporatist interests, and as if the discussion's dynamics would of necessity yield victory to the former. The French debate on this directive, as indeed on the Constitutional Treaty, gives the lie to his deliberative optimism.

Our scepticism is reinforced when we move from normative argumentation to political futurology. Stefano Bartolini's methodical criticism is very much to the point. He first reminds us of the well rehearsed arguments: a convergence of the majorities in the Parliament and the Council seems highly unlikely since the Council's political colour depends on national electoral rhythms fairly impervious to European issues. It follows that the Commission will always be a transversal coalition

rather than a homogenous majority; the politicisation of the choice of the President of the Commission is therefore liable to create expectations, which are bound to be disappointed. Bartolini does not stop there. A specialist well versed in the partisan phenomenon, he reminds us that the conditions enabling partisan organisations to politicise latent conflicts and to channel dissatisfaction are extremely difficult to pull together, and that the EU structure makes this prospect highly unlikely. At this point one might be tempted to think that he is laying it a bit thick. When he informs us that Euro-parties do not have the institutional means required to achieve ideological cohesion, Bartolini is found giving in to isomorphic temptation: the merit of Hix' research is precisely to have shown – along with Raunio's and Costa's – that parties generate discipline and coherence, not withstanding their inability to hand out sanctions or rewards to their members. This is a European singularity Bartolini ignores at his own risks: by tying too closely the EU to the nation-state archetype, he undermines his very critique.

Deep down, the problem of these debates is tied up with methodology. Hix and Bartolini share a thinking model, which reads the Union through nation-state concepts. Their conclusions are different (and Bartolini's scepticism seems better founded than Hix's optimism), but their approach is similar. Admittedly, it would be difficult to forego the comparative approach, the only one known to social sciences for both the purposes of understanding and forecasting. In which case it would be advisable to fine-tune one's attention to the perverse effects of isomorphisms, and be more particular in the identification of structural correspondences and differences between the Union and the systems to which it is being compared. Yannis Papadopoulos' communication recently published by Notre Europe is, in this respect, exemplary. Rather than gauging the EU against a supposedly abstract archetype of democracy (an impossible feat given the variations in the conceptions of democracy), Papadopoulos starts with a given configuration, the one he knows best: Swiss democracy. It is indeed tempting to say that Papadopoulos projects the Swiss model on the EU in the same way as Hix does the Westminster model. However, this option has, with our Swiss colleague, the merit to be explicit and explicated: the author deftly points to the strong structural homologies existing between the EU and Switzerland (système de clivages croisés, cross-party executive, bicameral Parliament, multilinguism, consociative approach to decision making …). Such an approach makes it possible to measure accurately the feasibility of the political developments advocated. Papadopoulos arrived at the conclusion that the EU is a democracy on the consociative model, the faults of which (gridlocked decisional system and absence of trans-national deliberation) could be remedied through the introduction of a popular initiative instrument. Whether you agree with him or not (as a Belgian political scientist, I am not given to overate consociative arrangements), you have got to admit that this type of approach has the merit to avoid the pitfalls of overindulged comparisons, which shrewd academics like Stefano Bartolini and Simon Hix found equally difficult to elude.