



Parliament  
Austria

Parliamentary Administration

# Day of Parliamentary Research 2024

**Report of the panel discussion: Why does  
performance matter? Different perspectives on  
performance and parliaments**

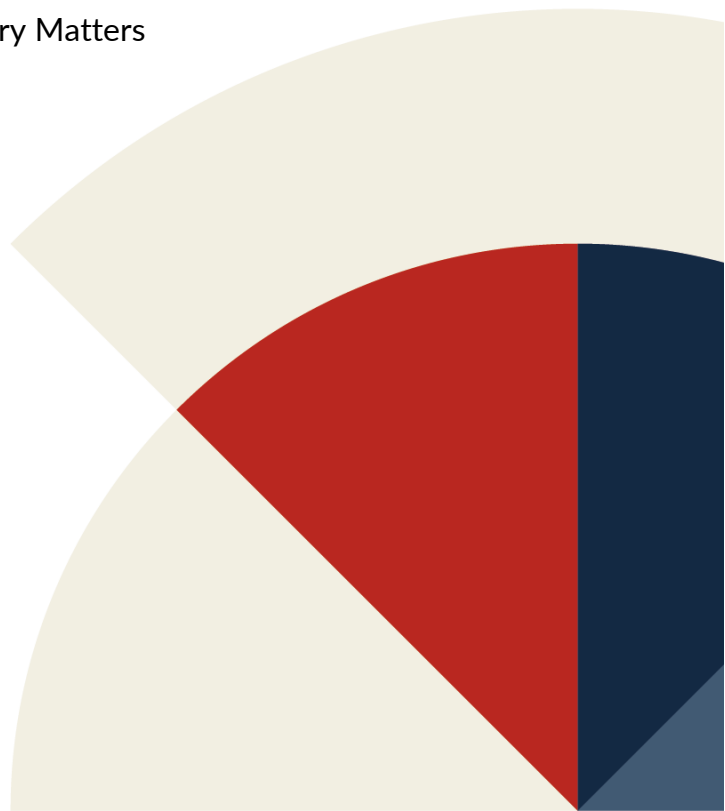
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Dep. 3.2 – Research and Support in Parliamentary Matters

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## Overview

The panel discussion was moderated by Philipp Blom, a well-known journalist, author and historian. Among his guests were Emma Crewe, a British anthropologist and leading expert in the field of parliamentary research, Thomas Hofer, an expert on political communication and author of numerous publications on the particularities of Austrian politics, and Lotte de Beer, artistic director of the Volksoper Wien.

## Synopsis

The final event of the Day of Parliamentary Research brought together individuals from various backgrounds who approach the subject of performance and politics in their own distinctive ways. Above all, it was meant to open up new perspectives, questions and strands for future discussion.

### Truth(s) and emotions in politics

Philipp Blom began the discussion with a powerful statement by the German constitutional judge Ernst-Wolfgang Böckenförde from half a century ago: “A liberal parliamentary democracy rests on assumptions it cannot guarantee itself.” This idea resonated throughout the discussion. Emma Crewe highlighted the importance of citizen engagement, arguing that parliamentarians should not just “perform to please people”. She pointed out misunderstandings about politics, such as the Prime Minister’s Question Time, which is not about tribalism but about demonstrating party credibility, that is its performance for the electorate. Crewe believes that one strain on democracies is the chronic misunderstanding of political processes, leading to cynicism and negativity because people tend to interpret these performances too literally.

Hofer drew a parallel to Austria, noting a similar trend towards negativity, and described how politicians use the Parliament as their stage by engaging with their audience through both social media and “unsocial media”, i. e. their own biased media



channels. Hofer emphasised that from a political communication perspective there are two main emotions: hope and fear. The trend towards negativity can be related to the emotion of fear which is easier to evoke than hope. While the creation of fear benefits from the fragmented media landscape, much more is required to create hope. In Hofer's view, democratic societies around the world are developing from democracies to emocracies (with 'e' standing for emotions), where emotions dominate over facts and figures, and individuals can create their own versions of truth. With the rise of social media in today's digital democracies, people increasingly believe they are entitled to their personal truth. A notable example is Donald Trump, but similar trends were observed in Austria and other European countries during the pandemic. Consequently, this post-factual discourse focuses on spurring emotions to appeal to constituencies, affecting parliamentary reality and making Böckenförde's statement more relevant and dramatic today than it was 50 years ago. The increasing relevance of Artificial Intelligence in politics, exemplified by the use of deepfakes, the manipulation of pictures and images, makes the authentication of content even more difficult. This presents a challenge for politics, as the legitimisation of decisions becomes increasingly complex for political actors. From Hofer's perspective, technological progress facilitates the coexistence of various incompatible truths. However, reconciling these personal truths into a cohesive societal reality remains imperative.

Lotte de Beer underlined how important it is to realise that there are many truths next to each other. For instance, social media makes a significant contribution to pulling everyone back into her or his bubble of truth. It implies that a debate consists of two monologues that bounce off each other, get radicalized, and just become more and more certain of themselves. Institutions such as the theatre have the chance to counter this. When you have got an auditorium in front of you, it is a chance not to divide, not to preach, not to convince, but to radically connect.

The aspect of individual truth(s) was taken up by Emma Crewe, who distinguished between two different versions of truth: a single objective truth and a series of subjectivities. While ultra-conservatives in Texas base their objective truth on the



Bible and the original constitution, some of the more left-wing Democrats believe in a series of subjective truths. Crewe argued that serious political debate and progress towards equality require moving beyond these fixed positions. Therefore she referred to pragmatist philosophers arguing that we do not need to choose between subjectivity and objectivity. Rather we should work towards understanding each other's subjective truth(s) to find common ground for a third position. This could be an important step towards achieving justice, equality and the aforementioned hope.

## **Power of narratives**

A further argument that was discussed was that the existence of any truth(s) is anchored in the process of narrative formation. Accordingly, a significant part of the conversation focused on the constructive and destructive powers of narratives. All participants agreed that narratives, although constructed and told to a wider audience (be it the audience of the opera or the electorate of the government), have real consequences. According to Phillipp Blom, narratives are the shared foundation of any society. Following on from this, Emma Crewe highlighted the dual nature of narratives as both shared and distinct. Politicians must differentiate themselves from one another to clarify their positions to the public. Simultaneously, societies require common ground, necessitating opposing sides to engage in dialogue that acknowledges not only differences but also shared concerns.

Thomas Hofer presented a pragmatic perspective on the role of narratives as political instruments. He observed that, in the Austrian context, certain actors, such as the Austrian Freedom Party (FPÖ), dispose over powerful, stringent and encompassing narratives. Their narratives reach from migration, COVID, and climate change policies to the alleged (over)regulation/suppression. Historically established parties such as the Social Democratic Party (SPÖ) or the Austrian People's Party (ÖVP), on the contrary, remain stuck in the outdated narrative of social mobility, and are not offering an attractive counter-narrative to the far-right. Similarly, Lotte de Beer accentuated the trap of reactionism whereby democratic forces constantly react to the compelling fear-enhancing narratives presented by the radical side. These counter-stories are



rational yet less appealing for broad parts of society. Therefore, she believes that democratic forces must adopt a more proactive approach to story-telling.