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Day of Parliamentary Research 2026

Discussion of the Keynote Speakers Ute Frevert (Max Planck Institute for Human Development) and Sabine Müller-Mall (Goethe University Frankfurt)

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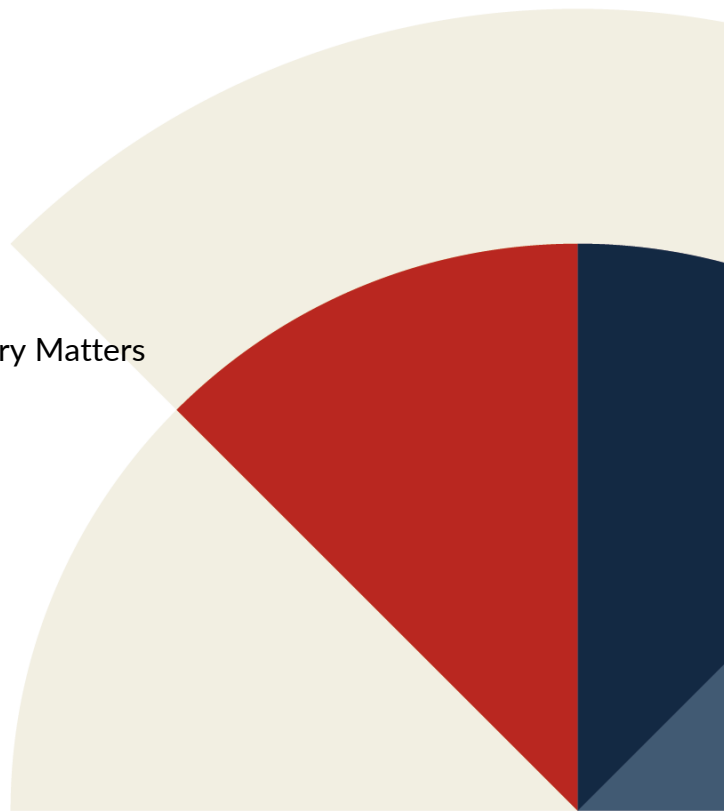
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Christoph Konrath: Mrs. Frevert, Mrs. Müller-Mall, thank you for this inspiring opening of our Day of Parliamentary Research. You have approached the questions of emotion and reason from two very different angles.

When we announced today's topic we received a lot of positive feedback. The abundance of emotions and the impressions of a lack of rational debate are always present whenever politics is discussed. They are so taken for granted that people often do not even know how to address them – or, indeed, whether they should be addressed at all, as this could call into question the expectations and standards one has in an institution such as parliament.

Prof. Frevert, you led the Max Planck Institute for Human Development – in German it is called Bildungsforschung which could be literally translated as educational research – and you have completed a lot of research on educational institutions. Today we are in a building that was built with the intention to educate parliamentarians. It is filled with edifying imagery. Why is it that we still seem to find it so difficult to acknowledge the role of emotions in institutional relationships and in our education for citizenship?

Ute Frevert: Good question, thanks for that. When we talk about education as a national project developed during the 19th century, we can recall the institutionalisation and development of Berlin University – founded by Wilhelm von Humboldt in 1810 – as the pivotal element of this new trust and belief in education: educating the nation. Education always meant installing a certain canon of knowledge and behaviour that should apply to all students. Sabine Müller-Mall just talked about the generalising effect of the law, but education, too, was supposed to have such generalising effect. It was to mould the modern person and citizen as someone who was responsible for handling both his private and public affairs in a reasonable manner. During the nineteenth century, that person was always thought to be male. But men were generally not born as rational beings, they had to be educated to become rational. The educational project was, in fact, very much about taming and excluding emotions and passionate behaviour, as the latter was deemed a quite



disruptive element in the generalisation of public institutions and public behaviour.

In a way, that project is still with us, and we are still in it. When people talk with disdain about the current emotionalisation of politics, they seem to imply that former political encounters and decision-making processes were more sober, were more neutral, were more restrained - which is, as I tried to show in my talk, not the case. But we hold on to the belief that politics, law, or education should actually be about this rational, objective person who is detached from his or her visceral faculties. Emotions are relegated to our private life, to romance, marriage, friendship, parenthood. Bridging the gap between public and private, then, is a challenge.

Christoph Konrath: Prof. Müller-Mall, you mentioned the sense of justice which remains a topos of parliamentary speech, and you have shown how emotions also shape the application of the law. However, legal discourse also involves distancing oneself from emotions, and this distancing can quite often be accompanied by a disparagement of politics. In political and political science debates we now see a dichotomy between parliaments and courts, between emotions and rationality. Can your approach help to recognise the complementarity of both spheres and institutions? Could this maybe be a contribution to a renewal of the democratic rule of law?

Sabine Müller-Mall: Well, at least I hope so. I don't know if it can really help to renew the rule of law - I don't know if it's even necessary to renew it, because we still act on it, so I think it's still there - but you're right, that's what I tried to show: how much both spheres are interconnected. Even if politics and law have very different spaces, cultures, and techniques - which is not a bad thing - they are still dependent on each other. Politics is directed towards the legal form, and the legal form is made to be politicised anew. It's not a form that we use forever. Nor is it the pure exercise of power we cannot work with; rather, it is a legal formalised form that we use for being politicised again. So, the legal form also keeps the political will accessible. I think it is very important to recognise this dependency. It is a major problem in contemporary discussions that sometimes people try to play them off against each other, which



always presupposes that we are dealing with very different spheres. For example, we imagine that politics is purely emotional and law is purely rational, and then we play them off against each other. The law is attacked for being political, and politics is attacked for being too legalistic – in terms of not being emotional enough or something like that. So, I think this is a problem.

What I try to show is that both spheres and both levels are involved in both practices, politics as well as law, and that we even need to have them interconnected on both of these levels. If we use the emotional level and the rational level in both spheres and try to translate from one sphere to the other, from politics to law, and always go back and keep this possibility open, then we have a dynamic procedure that is able to keep them both alive. But as soon as we freeze one side – for example, if we make laws that we cannot reopen politically, that we cannot discuss and change politically – we have a problem. On the other hand, if we stay in a heated political sphere and never get to tame the emotional side into a moment where we can find a political decision which can be formalised again, then we have a problem, too. So we need both. And this interconnectivity is just what keeps the whole system alive and stable at the same time – it's the dynamics that keeps it stable,

Ute Frevert: Can I just add one little piece – not add, but emphasise what you just said, Sabine, and what you also said in your conference, in your intervention? What we now know from research in neuroscience and a psychology that is based on neuroimaging methods is that what you describe as the interplay between emotion and reason is actually happening all the time. It's very rare, if not impossible, to find a decision that is purely informed by Vernunft, by rational deliberation. Emotions always intervene – and vice versa. We should not think about emotions as something that is – wherever it comes from, from the heart, from the bladder, from wherever – based in the body and then somehow finds expression in language or mimics or whatever. Most emotions have an element of rationality in it. It's not just something that is beyond reflection. Most emotions can be reflected on and are actually reflected on. We don't have to go as far as to suppose that every emotion is completely strategically meant and directed – that would go too far – but there is a



reason behind feeling this or that emotion at a certain point in time. So, using that evidence from neuroscientific research and methods actually it enforces the argument that you made about the interplay of emotions and reasoning faculties in these mechanics of politics and law.

Christoph Konrath: Today we are witnessing this interplay between digital networks and parliaments, as well as the potential offered by digitalisation: there's direct communication and mobilisation, but there is also a desire for greater efficiency and control. We are increasingly discovering – also here, in this parliament – that this interplay can lead to an algorithmic narrowing of options and polarisation. We experience, as Sabine Müller-Mall said, also a narrowing of judgment. We see that parliamentarians are not speaking with their counterparts in the plenary, instead they speak to the machine, so to say. This can eventually lead to growing frustration and aggression. It is challenging democratic politics – including hostility and the loss of hope: you cannot do anything about it because so much seems already predetermine and the only possibility left to an individual may be the expression of fury and anger. Do you share this impression? What insights from your research can help us to better understand and even react to these developments in digital polarisation and the transformation of politics into just a workflow?

Sabine Müller-Mall: Thank you. That's a very interesting question, but it's actually a very broad topic, because it contains different strands. I definitely agree that there is a kind of hatred and incitement in political life that has to do with these computational technologies in a broader sense. But I would say, this is something we can observe in many historical periods when new media emerge. We can also observe this in the Early Modern Period when the printing of posters generates new publics. We can observe this at any time: that there is a kind of escalatory mode in politics that is related to new technologies. But I would not be too upset about this, because I think we will find rules to get around with it, and this will calm down in a certain sense.

I have more doubts about the general development. I would like to make a very general point on what you first said: that maybe the extensive use of these



technologies – of algorithms, of computational technologies – changes the way we are able think of politics at all. I would actually very much agree with this thought, because I think we need to be aware of the fact that the way in which these technologies are used to find decisions – or results, as they call it – is very different from that of politics; it may even be the opposite. Calculation, probability, and statistics are probably very efficient for many matters and in many questions, but one thing is missing: the political moment as such.

Deliberation is sometimes slow, it is sometimes heated, it is not very objective until a decision is made, and the resulting decision may not always be the most efficient one in terms of content. But maybe it is able to, on a political level, represent something like the will of the people, as we think of it in political theory. And I think there is a very big distance to what smart technologies do. So, it's not really surprising that many of the big tech bros, as we call them, are actually against politics and are forcing a resentment against politics as such. I personally think that's the most dangerous part of it and the most important thing we should discuss: that the use of smart technologies is really the opposite and avoiding a lot of aspects of what we actually find productive when we use politics to make decisions about shaping the future.

Ute Frevert: Maybe I can add one aspect that plays out directly in parliament. As of today, parliamentary debates are monitored by social media strategies that are conducted by the various parties represented in parliament. When parliamentarians take the floor and deliver their speeches, they are filmed, and these film clips are being transmitted to their special audience through social media channels and platforms. Which means that they are speaking – passionately and in an antagonistic mode – to their own “bubble” and send them the message: Look, here we are, fighting for you and your interests, against all others. Parties of the extreme right do this far more aggressively than those of the centre. They do not speak to the other members of the house, but to their own constituency outside of parliament.

But in fact, this runs completely counter to anything that parliament is about. Of course, it should represent different interests, different opinions, different factions of



the population. At the same time, however, it is a space where those differences meet, deliberate, negotiate, and finally reach some kind of compromise when it comes to making binding decisions. Aristide Briand, the French foreign minister, once called a compromise perfect when nobody is happy with it. Everybody has to give up certain positions and claims in order to reach that compromise. Extreme parties, though, are not interested in listening, interacting and working out compromises. They like antagonisms, disruption, chaos.

Christoph Konrath: Thank you very much.

I would love to continue this discussion with you, but the aim of the Day of Parliamentary Research is also to encourage participants to engage with each other and hear from a lot of people. Your inspiring keynote speeches and this inspiring discussion have provided a great foundation for exploring all these questions in greater depth during the presentations on the latest research on emotions and rationality in parliaments, which we are going to start now.

In the afternoon we will continue the discussion on spaces and emotions with this year's researcher in parliament, Julia Rüdiger, when she presents her findings on that topic.

Prof. Müller-Mall, thank you very much once again for joining us despite your injury. We wish you all the best and a speedy recovery. Prof. Frevert, thank you very much for coming to Vienna and sharing so many important thoughts with us.

Thank you.