



Parliament  
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# Seminar “Time(s) and Parliaments”

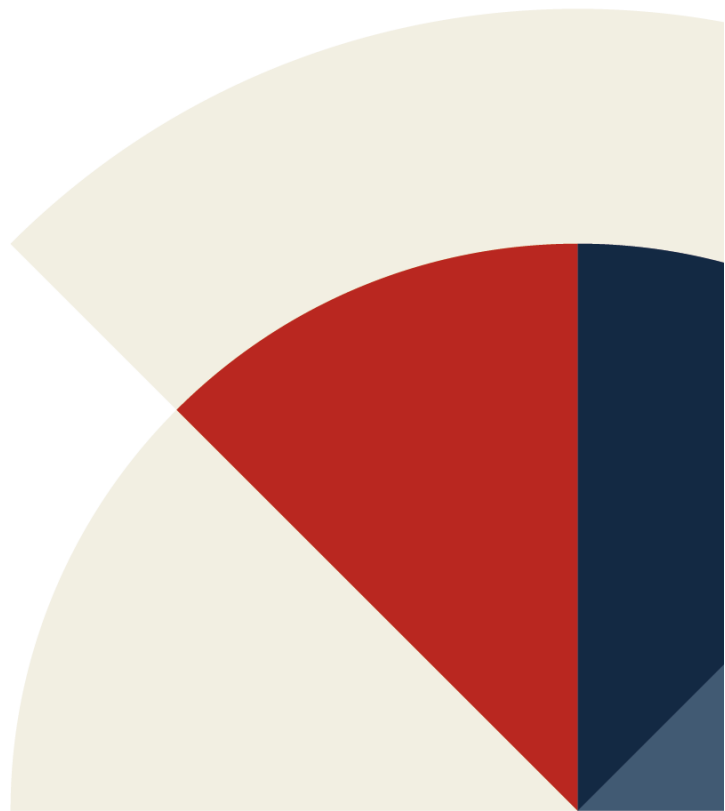
**Report on the discussion: “No time for the future?  
From dystopias to utopias and everything in between”**

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## Overview

The discussion “No time for the future? From dystopias to utopias and everything in between”, moderated by political scientist and futures expert Isabella Hermann, was one of the highlights of the seminar “Time(s) and Parliaments”. The following guests joined the moderator in a lively discussion on how the future can be imagined and shaped: Barbara Imhof, space architect and professor of integrative design at the University of Innsbruck, Tapio Raunio, professor of political science at Tampere University, and Gerfried Stocker, media artist and Artistic and Managing Director of Ars Electronica in Linz.

## Challenges of the future and the present

Isabella Hermann started the discussion at “our rather negative and dystopian present” and asked the discussants about their views on current and future challenges. Gerfried Stocker took up the concept of dystopia and explained that many people display a certain “angstlust” when imagining catastrophic future scenarios. According to Stocker, one reason for these far-spread dystopian outlooks is the lack of imagination and confidence regarding society’s ability to solve present problems and thereby create a better future. The media artist claimed that the “hype” about foresight cannot be explained by fear of the future but rather by fear of the present.

The topic of foresight was also approached from a parliamentary perspective by Tapio Raunio. According to the political scientist, one central challenge regarding foresight in parliaments is the discrepancy between the importance of MPs focusing on long-term future issues on the one side and the interest of voters in more short-term day-to-day problems on the other. Raunio saw another time-related problem in the ex post judicial review that exists in most democratic countries which means that courts can only challenge questionable political decisions made in the past. More precisely, he explained that, even in democracies, autocratic politicians can get away with infringing the constitution since the corresponding legal processes can sometimes go on for several years.



A very different set of future challenges was mentioned by Barbara Imhof who talked about current and future issues in outer space. Beside the technical challenges of space travel (e. g. the strong radiation or the enormous distance between planets), she also mentioned political issues that have to be tackled in the future. The latter include, upon other things, questions regarding democratic structures and the ownership of resources in space. Imhof also corrected the image of private companies as sponsors of space expeditions by underlining that the activities of these companies are mainly commissioned by public institutions and thereby financed by tax money.

## **Shaping the future with art, parliaments, and (space) science**

The discussants, however, did not only present a broad range of present and future challenges – both on earth and in space – but also discussed innovative approaches for overcoming these obstacles. Gerfried Stocker pledged for the power of art to envision and uncover new paths forward and to find new solutions to current issues. Art, Stocker claimed, often disregards the obvious initial answers and allows for creative new approaches to challenges. Paradoxically, this means that only by allowing art to be “useless”, it can create something innovative and “useful”. Stocker also proposed that parliament and MPs should engage more strongly with art events and initiatives outside of the parliamentary building and then bring these new perspectives and insights back into the debate. The recommendation of parliament going out and widening its horizon was explicitly agreed to by Barbara Imhof.

Recommendations for parliaments from a more institutional perspective were presented by Tapio Raunio. He argued that parliaments should invest more resources in future-oriented decision making – for example by establishing future committees. As an example, he showed that the parliamentary Committee for the Future in Finland was able to significantly improve the status and importance of foresight in decision-making processes of government. This, for example, means that today every Finnish ministry produces a yearly foresight report in its corresponding area of responsibility. Similarly, Raunio argued that it is important for politicians to have futures literacy (i. e.



to understand the long-term implications of their decisions) in their specialized policy field. Coming back to the above mentioned ex post judicial review, Raunio suggested the introduction of ex ante constitutional reviews by parliaments – meaning that a constitutional committee reviews new laws regarding their conformity with the constitution before they enter into force.

Barbara Imhof elaborated which learnings for the future on earth can be drawn from the present in outer space. She explained that astronauts have very limited resources on space stations and therefore need to use them very efficiently, as well as recycle them as thoroughly as possible (e. g. by refining and drinking their own urine). Furthermore, she mentioned that many technologies designed for outer space can also be used in innovative ways on earth. However, one of the most important things that can be drawn from space travel is the vision of people from different nations cooperating and working towards a common objective – even if their home countries are enemies on earth. Imhof mentioned that astronauts are able to see the world as a “small blue marble” which makes borders and international conflicts seem less significant and fosters the vision of a world that is shared by all of humanity.

One central conclusion that was drawn by the discussants and the moderator was the importance of establishing constructive and innovative future narratives. In this context, Gerd Stöckert pledged for using art to create “the energy and the space of imagination” in which non-dystopian visions of the future can arise. Barbara Imhof agreed that a lack of imagination leads to dystopian outlooks and that, when thinking about the future, not only the limitations and restraints but also the positive effects of change and transformation should be taken into account.