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Managing in times of crisis : the case of the European Parliament

Giancarlo Vilella

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I punti essenziali del ragionamento sviluppato in questo articolo sono: il Covid-19 ha messo in evidenza il ruolo svolto dall'amministrazione come ponte nel confronto (conflittuale) tra il potere della scienza e il potere politico; l'emergenza sanitaria ha messo in luce l'importanza del funzionamento delle istituzioni parlamentari per la difesa della democrazia dato che il potere esecutivo (oggettivamente) ha il sopravvento. L'amministrazione del Parlamento europeo è un caso di studio molto interessante in questo senso perché è riuscita a far fronte all'emergenza grazie a diversi fattori; l'EPA ha attuato negli ultimi anni un programma di digitalizzazione strutturale del Parlamento europeo. Infine, l'EPA ha lavorato per attivare una capacità amministrativa per gestire le "misure senza precedenti" che si sono dovute adottare: tale capacità è stata raggiunta realizzando le azioni nel rigoroso quadro della governance del Parlamento europeo e sotto il suo controllo permanente.

The essential points of the reasoning developed in this article are: Covid-19 has brought to the fore the role played by the administration as a bridge in the (conflictual) confrontation between the power of science and political power; the health emergency has cast light on the importance of the functioning of parliamentary institutions for the defence of democracy because the executive branch (objectively) gets the upper hand. The administration of the European Parliament is a very interesting case study in this respect because it has succeeded in coping with the emergency thanks to several factors; EPA implemented a programme of structural digitisation of the European Parliament in recent years. Finally, EPA worked for activating an administrative capacity to manage the "unprecedented measures" that had to be adopted: this capacity was achieved by carrying out the actions within the strict framework of the governance of the European Parliament and under its permanent scrutiny.

The emergency caused by the Covid-19 pandemic has cast light on the important role played by the public administration in managing the crisis, and in particular the central role of its management. Recently, Zeger Van der Wal explained in a very pertinent way^[1] that the capacity of the public administration is an essential factor for ensuring resilience, trust and an exit from the crisis: in this context, the public managers are those who work behind the scenes, in a complex and uncertain environment, to deliver results. Van der Wal identifies three “key competences” which managers must know how to use for smart management in times of crisis, such as that of Covid-19: explaining and selling unprecedented measures; astute relationship with the political masters; empowering and leveraging networks. This is an interesting suggestion, following which I would put forward some considerations on the experience of the European Parliament as a case study.

First, however, I must add that in a situation such as the health emergency that we are currently undergoing, the role played by the administration is much more delicate than just ensuring good management, because it is intended above all to ensure balance in the ongoing conflict between powerful actors in our societies, namely science and politics. Max Weber was way ahead of his time when he identified the development of this conflict a century ago^[2]. As Weber explained in a way that has never been unsurpassed, the three essential subjects/protagonists are: science/technology, the political sphere and the administration. Weber understood perfectly where we were going a century ago and his analysis is altogether suited to the current situation, specifically in the context of the Covid-19 emergency: in fact, the three protagonists in question are hard at work. Weber explains that in modern times the main dialectic, which in truth is a relationship that tends to be conflictual, is between science/technology and the political sphere: in both cases, Weber said, evolution would lead to their professionalisation, to the disenchantment of the world, risking a separation that will have to be reconciled. On the one hand, there is science/technology, concentrated on its subject-matter in complete autonomy and with its tendency to be hegemonic; on the other hand, there is the political sphere, which has to come to terms with science/technology, but must be able to take the most appropriate decisions, that is to say, must be able to decide having regard to all the elements necessary for the government of society and not only the subject-

matter of science. This is exactly what we are experiencing today in general terms with technological progress, which tends to be hegemonic and separated from the political sphere, while the latter tries to bring everything back together within the framework of a global governance of society: and this has been accentuated by Covid-19. The question is: where is the factor of possible reconciliation to be found? The philosopher Massimo Cacciari, reconstructing Weber's thought, tells us: «*Without a technical-bureaucratic apparatus, without organisation, without skills, politics is not a profession, and will therefore necessarily be ineffective in governing a world dominated by technical/scientific powers. A political sphere which does not want or is unable to structure itself professionally internally and equip itself as a whole with powerful administrative/bureaucratic structures will simply be opting for impotence*^[3]».

Generally, when we speak of the public administration, we mean administration acting at the level of government, the executive branch, and we also include local and regional authorities, always as executive branch. Van der Wal is no exception and focuses on this type of administration and management. Well, this is a very serious limitation in scholarly literature in general, but it becomes really serious problem when it comes to emergency situations of the type brought about by Covid-19. The reason is very clear: Y. N. Harari says that «*[t]he storm will pass, humankind will survive, most of us will still be alive - but we will inhabit a different world*». What world? It depends on the choices we make: «*The first*» – says Harari – «*is between totalitarian surveillance and citizen empowerment*»^[4]. He is not alone in taking this view, the debate on this issue over the past year has been very intense and wide-ranging. An example, among many, is the appeal made to the institutions by a group of intellectuals in Italy^[5]: the appeal contends that “all at home” (confinement) is poisonous for the institutions because it puts democracy into quarantine. According to the authors of the appeal, Parliament assembles only intermittently, converts decrees into laws hastily and does not exercise its power of holding the executive to account; the government meets at night and communicates through social media; the Prime Minister limits constitutional rights by decree, and so on. Democracy cannot be suspended, the appeal says, because if «*you resign yourself to something today, you will lose freedom tomorrow*».

In short, also an emergency (in this case a health emergency, but we have

experienced a terrorism emergency or immigration emergency too) is a factor which puts democracy at risk, especially its representative institutions such as parliaments: this is the reason why there is general agreement on the need to set strict time limits to special powers in emergency situations, such as that of Covid-19, in democratic countries, where, moreover, it must be obligatory to justify them, but at the same time do everything to allow parliaments to continue to function and exercise their powers.

The European Parliament was among the first (or perhaps the first) to become aware of the situation, as can be seen from the stances it adopted as early as April 2019, that is to say, a few weeks after the emergency erupted. A Resolution^[6] adopted by the Plenary, the European Parliament's highest political level, clearly states: *«the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union and compliance with the rule of law must continue to apply, and ... in the context of emergency measures, the authorities must ensure that everyone enjoys the same rights and protection; ... all measures taken at national and/or EU level must be in line with the rule of law, strictly proportionate to the exigencies of the situation, clearly related to the ongoing health crisis, limited in time and subjected to regular scrutiny»*. The President of Parliament, David Maria Sassoli, himself made a statement, saying: *«Our message is clear: democracy continues to function; all parliamentary bodies are continuing to work to tackle the Covid-19 emergency. We have ensured that MEPs are still able to meet remotely, participate in debates, propose amendments and vote. Democracy will continue»*^[7] It is important to remind that the EP confirmed its approach during the whole 2020 year and obtained significant results in the adoption of the Multiannual Financial Framework 2021-2027, the Interinstitutional Agreement, the EU Recovery Instrument and the Rule of Law Regulation^[8]. In the related Resolution, after having stressed that an effective Rule of Law Regulation and the introduction of new own resources were a pre-condition of the European Parliament to agree with the MFF package, the EP at par. 9 *«stresses that co-legislators have agreed that the Regulation on a general regime of conditionality for the protection of the Union budget shall apply from 1 January 2021 and will have to be applied to all commitments and payments; expects the Commission, as the guardian of the Treaties, to ensure that the Regulation is fully applicable from the date agreed by the co-legislators and recalls that annulment of the Regulation or part of it is only*

possible by the CJEU» and added that the Parliament will defend its validity before the Court and expects the Commission to intervene in support of Parliament's position.

Now the question is as simple as it is frequently (or always) forgotten: who makes it possible that *all parliamentary bodies can continue to work to tackle the Covid-19 emergency*? Who ensures *that MEPs are still able to meet remotely, participate in debates, propose amendments and vote*? The answer is just as simple: it is the administration of the European Parliament (EPA). The EPA case study is a success story from which the following lesson can be drawn: in order to deal successfully with an emergency situation such as Covid-19, it is not enough to activate good managerial capacities, it is necessary that the administration should already have a solid basis for action and structures already prepared to adapt to unforeseen situations. What I mean is that what is "unforeseen" must be the situation which has to be tackled, not what the administration has to do. Under the leadership of Secretary General Klaus Welle and with the support of top management, the EPA has worked steadily over the last ten years to prepare these solid foundations by following two parallel but connected paths: on the one hand, by pursuing innovation in working methods, on the other, by achieving the digitisation of the institution. It is thanks to this that the response to the Covid-19 emergency was excellent and the European Parliament has continued to function.

As far as working methods are concerned^[9], the EPA has built a management system step by step, based on the method of combining vision and planning, together with the approach of a joint use of a matrix and metrics. The "vision" takes into account the context (internal and external) in which the work is performed, thanks to an analysis of what is happening and what could happen. "Planning" determines the adoption of projects coordinated by sectors, with a clear indication of the objectives and responsibilities. Vision and planning together give rise to the Strategic Execution Framework, a planning document for a three-year period, which is the reference for the long-term work of the European Parliament's administration. The "matrix" approach establishes the interrelationships between the various projects and objectives, thus fostering internal cooperation, whilst the "metrics" approach allows for permanent measurement and scrutiny of the results achieved: what is interesting in the

EPA's experience is that an effort is made (with difficulty, but consistently) to ensure that the two aspects (matrix/metrics) are not separated.

As far as the digitisation of the institution is concerned^[10], the EPA has succeeded in making the European Parliament a parliamentary world leader in the use of technology for its activities thanks to its awareness of the importance of that process in the future: significant financial and human resources have been made available for this purpose. Over a number of years, up to the 2019 elections, the digitisation of the institution has seen the implementation of: eCommittee, eMeeting, the Drafting Support Tool, AT4AM, Digital Signature, ICT services for constituency offices, XML, metadata and indexing, eVote. As of 2019, a new programme that we find described in a DG ITEC document^[11] is being implemented: it identifies the strategic guidelines for the current (9th) legislature, whereby the aim is to accelerate the digital transformation of the Institution by means of a number of projects. We find a package of projects designed to increase DG ITEC's ability to be more resilient, open and efficient: service improvement, cybersecurity, metrics collection, contract staff, meeting customers' needs and IT capacity building for democracy support. DG ITEC wishes to help other parliaments become more transparent, accountable and effective through the development of IT governance and the sharing of knowledge. Next, we find a second package of projects calculated to improve the digital workplace (for MEPs, assistants and staff): ICT support, needs-based printing, the ITEC catalogue of services and Parliamentary open data. In addition, there are two other projects, referred to as game changers: that is to say, speeding up the move towards cloud computing and artificial intelligence (AI). These plans are a clear contribution to strengthening parliamentary democracy through a process of digital transformation.

In short, when the Covid-19 emergency erupted in the first months of 2020, the EPA did not have to invent a new type of management to deal with it, but had to be able to adapt its solid structure - based on innovative working methods and advanced digitisation - to the new situation. As I said just now: to deal successfully with an emergency situation like Covid-19, it is not enough to activate good managerial skills, it is necessary that the administration should already have a sound basis for action. This does not mean, of course, that the activation of good managerial skills is not equally necessary: the three "key

competences” identified by Van der Wal, in fact, are well suited to the experience of the EPA, as is the context which he adumbrates. It is true, as Van der Wal says, that Covid-19 requires us to act in a complex, volatile and uncertain environment, for which flexibility, unconventional expertise and strategy are necessary: the EPA has been able to adapt to the new situation thanks (as we have seen above) to its habit which has evolved over many years of working on a strategic plan, of imagining and developing projects, not for here and now, but for the future, and of using sophisticated technological support. These are all things that have fostered a propensity for flexibility and a willingness to learn new skills.

Even the EPA had to take “unprecedented measures” to make the institution work, mainly in the use of technology and logistics. As for the former, what we have been looking at is the possibility of effective remote working of MEPs and staff: connecting from their personal laptops; token access for security; email access through webmail; extranet access; jabber access; VDI for remote access; email access on phone or tablet; hybrids. Information technology tools had to replace physical meetings and thus contribute to enabling Parliament to exercise its core functions and to enabling remote participation in meetings of Parliament’s governing bodies, committees and the plenary, including electronic voting. As for logistics, the actions taken were conceived in two stages, first the immediate and urgent reaction, then the definition of a “new” normality^[12]. First, early reaction: almost immediate and complete lock-down of Parliament’s premises from a logistics perspective (while fully ensuring both political and administrative activities); no physical presence allowed and a massive teleworking scheme (100% except essential services); first limited and targeted distribution of protective devices (masks, gloves, gel, plexiglas screens); only virtual meetings (both political and administrative); cancellation of missions between the three sites; re-adaptation of office space allocation observing social distancing; cancellation of public activities/no visitors allowed; stop to “on premises” services for staff and Members (e.g. catering, transport); stop to maintenance and construction works (external contractors). Then, new normality: gradual return to the office, introduction of a 70%, 80%, 90% teleworking scheme according to the activities’ criticality level; set up of a structured distribution of protective devices to staff; introduction of a temperature scan at the entrances to

Parliament's premises (re-deployment of some staff, mail ushers vs print-shop staff); widespread installation of gel distributors in the institution's buildings; increased and massive distribution to staff of equipment (IT and non-IT) at home to improve ergonomics (portable devices, screens, keyboards, mice, ergonomic chairs); mixed mode meetings, both virtual and in presence; gradual reopening to visitors and public facilities with reduced availability and respecting safety measures; partial reopening of catering facilities with a reduced offer (addition of a take-away option); re-start of maintenance and construction works respecting security measures (external contractors).

Frankly, I think I can say that we have before us a clear vision of how to intervene, even if these are "unprecedented measures". The method used for explaining and selling these measures to MEPs, staff, the other institutions and external users (journalists, researchers, citizens), i.e. the EPA's stakeholders, follows a strict principle: to act exclusively within the framework of European Parliament governance. All decisions were agreed upon in advance by the Secretary General with the President before being drawn up; they were then submitted to the Bureau for confirmation (if urgent) or for decision if deferred; lastly, top management exercised permanent scrutiny of the effects of the measures taken, whilst the Secretary General presented regularly (at least once a month, or even more frequently) a detailed report on how things were proceeding. The management, therefore, acted in permanent contact with the governance of the institution, which also meets the requirements of the relationship with the political master. Finally, as regards the strengthening of collaborative works, the approach already introduced by the EPA of tuning matrixes and metrics has had the effect of bringing the various services into tune with each other in a truly exceptional manner.

To conclude^[13], it is worthwhile summarising the essential points of the reasoning developed in this article. In the first place, Covid-19 has brought to the fore the role played by the administration in the Weberian sense, that is to say, as a bridge in the (conflictual) confrontation between the power of science and political power: gaining awareness of this helps to develop administrative capacities. Secondly, the health emergency we are now living through has cast light on the importance of the functioning of parliamentary institutions for the defence of democracy because the executive branch (objectively) gets the upper

hand: the administrations of parliaments play a decisive role here. The administration of the European Parliament is a very interesting case study in this respect because it has succeeded in coping with the emergency thanks to several factors. The first factor is that over the last ten years the EPA has developed new working methods based on vision/planning and a matrix/metrics: this has proved a sound basis for dealing with the emergency because it has fostered the necessary planning capacity and administrative cooperation. The second factor is that the EPA implemented a programme of structural digitisation of the European Parliament in recent years: this also proved to be a winning element in dealing with the situation because the technologies were essential in order to make the machine work. The third factor consisted in activating an administrative capacity to manage the “unprecedented measures” that had to be adopted: this capacity was achieved by carrying out the actions within the strict framework of the governance of the European Parliament and under its permanent scrutiny.

1. Zeger VAN DER WAL, *Being a Public Manager in Times of Crisis: The Art of Managing Stakeholders, Political Masters, and Collaborative Networks*, in *Public Administration Review*, Vol. 80, Iss. 5, 2020, pp. 759-764.
2. I am referring, of course, to the two essays, *The Vocation Lectures* (Edited and with an Introduction by D. OWEN and T.B. STRONG, Translation by R. LIVINGSTONE), Hackett, Indianapolis/Cambridge, 2004: this book brings together the celebrated lectures given by Max Weber in Vienna (1917-1919) on “Wissenschaft als Beruf” and “Politik als Beruf”. However, for the considerations that follow I have taken my inspiration from Massimo CACCIARI, *Il lavoro dello spirito. Saggio su Max Weber*, Adelphi, Milano, 2020, essay on “geistige Arbeit”.
3. CACCIARI, cited in the preceding note (translated by the author).
4. Y.N. HARARI, *The world after coronavirus*, *Financial Times*, 20 March 2020.
5. The first signatory was Prof. Marcello Pera, a former President of the Senate of the Italian Republic: see *Corriere della Sera*, 25 March 2020.
6. European Parliament resolution of 17 April 2020 on EU coordinated action to combat the COVID-19 pandemic and its consequences, P9_TAPROV(2020)0054.
7. The passage in italics is taken word for word from the report in the POLITICO Brussels Playbook of 3 April 2020.
8. European Parliament resolution of 17 December 2020, P9_TA-PROV(2020)0360.
9. For an in-depth, detailed analysis of this aspect, see G. VILELLA, *Working methods of the European Parliament Administration in Multi-actors World. A case-study*, European Press Academic Publishing, Florence, 2019: I carried out this study pursuant to a formal mandate from Secretary General K. Welle (in agreement with the then President of

CERIDAP

Parliament, A. Tajani) and developed it during a research period at the European University Institute in Florence.

10. See G. VILELLA, *The European Parliament Administration facing the challenge of eDemocracy*, European Press Academic Publishing, Florence, 2021, for a detailed, in-depth appraisal of this aspect: this study was also carried out on basis of a formal mandate from Secretary General K. Welle (in agreement with President D. M. Sassoli). For further particulars, see also G. VILELLA, *E-Democracy. Dove ci porta la democrazia digitale*, Pendragon, Bologna, 2020, in particular on the European Parliament, at pp. 233-262.
11. *Information and Communication Technology (ICT) in the European Parliament: Strategic orientations 2019-2021*, authored by W. Petrucci, with the agreement of the Secretary General, D(2019)34304, October 2019. This is a Note to the Members of the Bureau Working Party on ICT Innovation Strategy
12. For the logistics aspects, I am indebted to the excellent and very clear description given by Gabriele BABINI, *Logistics and Covid-19 pandemic. The European Parliament experience*, PDF seminal presentation online, Brussels, 2 November 2020: the interventions I describe in the text can be found in slides 5 and 6 of this brilliant presentation.
13. By closing this article, I wish to thank Prof. Maddalena Sorrentino, UNIMI, for the inputs she gave me in conceiving it.