

The German Enquete Commission on growth, prosperity and quality of life: a model for futures studies?

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Abstract From January 2011 until April 2013, the Enquete Commission “Growth, Prosperity, Quality of Life”, a political body appointed by the German parliament and consisting of 17 experts and 17 MPs, analysed aspects of a sustainable economy and new indicators of prosperity. Based on an analysis of the commission’s texts, the article shows that (A) the quality of the commission’s work is very heterogeneous from a futures studies point of view. This is exemplified by an analysis of the way the commission members perceive characteristics of the future. Nevertheless, the article argues that (B) the transparent dissent visible in the commission’s texts can shed new light on the discussion of objectivity in futures studies. Self-reflexive research which strives for a diverse and transdisciplinary structure—as can be observed in the Enquete Commission -, may lead to better results. In the conclusion, the benefits, but also the dangers of such new perspectives in research are discussed.

Keywords Enquete Commission · Objectivity · Limits to growth · Policy advice · Document analysis · Transdisciplinary futures studies

Introduction

In December 2010, for the 27th time, the German parliament set up a body that is singular on the political landscape in its scope and composition: an Enquete Commission. Such commissions have been a common instrument of the German parliament, the *Bundestag*, since 1969 [1]. Unlike similar commissions in other countries, they are not appointed by

the government or the head of state, but by parliament upon a motion supported by a quarter of the MPs. Their objective is to contribute to a balance between the executive and the legislative power, as they provide policy advice to parliament on complex, long-term, special issues in order to prepare legislation [2, 3]. The most extraordinary characteristic of an Enquete commission is its composition. Half of its members are parliamentarians, appointed in proportion to the size of parliamentary groups. The other half consists of external experts, mostly academics, who are appointed by the parliamentary groups. Their number also mirrors the proportion of groups in parliament. The experts have the same rights as the MPs, although their actual influence has been controversially discussed. By using internal and external expertise, the commission collects information relevant to the issue at hand. The members then debate the information in regular sessions and working groups.

The result is a final report on the issue parliament requested information about, which must be delivered by the end of the electoral term. It usually contains concrete recommendations for action. The special quality of this report is its plurality (which in the course of the article will be called transparent dissent). The main chapters and recommendations are supported by a majority in the commission, but a minority or individual members may include *minority votes*. The rationale of these votes in the report is more complex and pluralistic policy advice. The final report is then debated in a plenary session in parliament and further used in the permanent parliamentary committees.

There is no consensus on the political impact of Enquete commissions: some academics see a long-term, possibly indirect influence through awareness-raising and agenda-setting; others point out that the commissions often avoid very controversial issues and that party politics at times prevents an open discussion [2, 4].

The commission that is the subject of this article was appointed to examine growth and perspectives on prosperity

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and well-being. Its work may be placed in the context of reflexive modernity, in which modern society and academia need to face and handle the risks they themselves have created and criticise them [5, 6]. One of these now independent processes of modernisation is the apparent dependency of modern society on economic growth with all its ecological, political and social consequences [7]. This problem was already pointed out in 1972 by the Club of Rome report “Limits to Growth” [8]. Since then, the dominant acceptance of an inherent need for growth has been criticised widely [7, 9]. In response to this criticism, the German parliament as a political actor established an Enquete Commission, which had the explicit mission to challenge the growth paradigm: a remarkable act of self-reflection. A majority of parliamentary groups supported the motion that called upon the Bundestag to appoint

an Enquete Commission “Growth, Prosperity and Quality of Life—Paths to Sustainable Economic Activity and Social Progress in the Social Market Economy” (...). The Enquete Commission aims to advance the programmatic examination of Germany’s well-being prospects for the coming decades, of our understanding of prosperity and well being and of the principles that may help us to meet the economic, social and ecological challenges [10].

The Enquete Commission (in German: *Enquete-Kommission “Wachstum, Wohlstand, Lebensqualität”—Wege zu nachhaltigem Wirtschaften und gesellschaftlichem Fortschritt in der Sozialen Marktwirtschaft*) consisted of 17 experts and 17 MPs of the following political parties: 6 MPs from the conservative CDU/CSU parliamentary group, 4 from the Social Democrats (SPD), 3 from the Liberals (FDP), 2 from the Left Party and 2 from the environmentalist Green party. From January 2011 until April 2013, the five project groups of the commission analysed the importance of growth, alternative indicators of prosperity and well-being, resource consumption, technological progress, opportunities and limits of decoupling, sustainable regulatory policy, the world of work, consumer behaviour and lifestyles. The final report had more than 800 pages and included 60 minority votes [11]. The media’s judgement on the work of the commission was mostly negative: most members of the commission were too reluctant to challenge mindsets focused on growth, too few attempts were made to develop visions of a society independent of growth. Observers of the commission did, however, note that it had partially succeeded in raising awareness on criticism of dominant concepts of growth and prosperity and also provided intelligent analyses on issues such as the need for an absolute reduction [12, 13].

The following sections of this article will, first, briefly explain the motivation to analyse a political body from a

futurist point of view. Second, there will be a description of material and the qualitative approach chosen to analyse the Enquete commission’s texts. The two main sections will then explore how futures studies concepts and terms are reflected in the texts and argue how futures studies approaches could benefit from the commission’s procedures. This is then discussed in the conclusion.

Motivation

Enquete Commissions have been compared to research institutions before—mostly by way of criticising what, after all, was meant to be a political project. The fact that the reports published by Enquete Commissions sometimes became relevant expert literature on certain topics and often prompted a response from academic disciplines may be an indicator of the position they occupy in an academic environment [4].

A comparison between futures studies and the issues and methods of an Enquete Commission is not unfounded either. Enquete Commissions are considered as “effective temporary bodies for handling cross-sector and long-term issues” [14] that strive to capture “complex developments” and to develop “proposals for shaping the future” [3]. Also, they have succeeded in raising awareness of issues relevant to future society neglected so far [4].

Enquete Commissions may also be seen as fulfilling the demand of interdisciplinarity directed at futures studies: members learn to understand the thinking patterns of other groups [15, 16].

Materials and methods

This article is based on the assumption that there is no access to the future that does not have language as its medium [17]. Images of the future and an understanding of the future can therefore only be grasped through an analysis of utterances. At the same time and from a constructivist point of view, language creates reality. Whoever talks about the future and the way in which they do so is relevant, since every statement is a contribution to the discourse where current dominant images of the future are negotiated [18].

The material fundament of the analysis consists mainly of the final report of the Enquete Commission and the minutes of its sessions, selected according to their thematic relevance to futures studies. Part (A) of the analysis is an attempt to find out how futures studies has so far influenced a political body such as the Enquete Commission. To do so, the texts produced by the commission were searched for arguments and keywords relevant to futures studies. The results of this search were compared to a compilation of fundamental assumptions about the nature of the future collected by a number of futurists [19].

Part (B) of the analysis is an attempt to improve futures studies by highlighting certain problematic aspects of objectivity vs. subjectivity, which the Enquete Commission, as a political body, has dealt with differently than futures studies generally has. The analysis traces the conflicts and different perspectives that are reflected in the texts produced by the commission. The results and the opportunities they offer are then examined in three lines of argument called *subjectivity*, *diversity* and *transdisciplinarity*.

The article is thus a qualitative and theoretical exploration that aims to encourage futurists to critically examine their own perspectives and methods as well as the impact of futures studies on other spheres such as politics.

Assumptions about the nature of the future

As any other researcher, futurists work on the basis of certain fundamental assumptions, in this case assumptions about the nature of the future. Making these assumptions explicit is a productive approach, since “each assumption contributes both to the conduct of futures studies as most futurists understand the aims of the field and to the intellectual products that futurists create” [20]. The following list is a compilation of fundamental assumptions and views collected by a number of futurists over time:

- (a) Things are different in the future than they are today [20].
- (b) All relevant things (such as laws of nature and human nature) do not change [21].
- (c) The future is predetermined [22, 23].
- (d) The future is open [24].
- (e) The future can be influenced [20].
- (f) The future develops in a certain direction [21, 24]
- (g) Some futures are better than others [20].
- (h) The future is uncertain [25]
- (i) It is possible to know something about the future [26]

It is, however, important to note that these assumptions do not form a theory, nor are they all scientific. They even contradict each other. Nevertheless, examples of such fundamental assumptions can be found in the way members of the Enquete Commission think—and assumed to influence their work.

An analysis of the commission’s texts finds that certain futurist terms and concepts are under- or misrepresented in the commission’s texts [19]. For example, the final report does not contain any reflection on the *openness* of the future [24]. Instead, the idea of a *predetermined* future seems to motivate many statements on the use of prognoses (see below). Frequently, the term *probability* is used in cases where *plausibility* applies, since there is an argumentative connection rather than a quantified probability. This is relevant, since the

term *probability* suggests a mathematical computability and thus certainty, which is nonexistent in a social and political environment [11].

The concept of *scenarios* is often connected to possibilities and probabilities, which, however, are a comparatively minor purpose of scenario processes in futures studies [11, 27]. The use of the term suggests that scenarios are perceived as an (insufficient) substitute for prognoses, not as an “inventory of thoughts” [28] while consciously acknowledging limits.

The trust in *prognoses* is often found in the commission’s texts [11, 29–31]—without reflecting that it is not the occurrence of a predicted event that determines the quality of a prognosis, but the fact that it motivates reasonable action, especially action *preventing* its occurrence [20]. Neither do the texts mention the inherent normative potential of every prognosis or the conflict between a seemingly predetermined future and the desire to shape it politically [29].

On the other hand, many members of the commission demonstrate that they have critically reflected on the nature of the future, challenging the concept of progress and also accepting limits to shaping the future [32]. However, the power of political decisions is not underestimated either, since they affect what is imaginable [11]. In several cases, members of the commission acknowledge that perspectives are limited by their time; and prognoses of earlier times, such as the ones in “Limits to Growth”, must therefore be judged not by their occurrence, but by the impact they had on political action [30]. The texts also contain several relevant theoretical terms of futures studies, such as *possible futures*, *uncertainty* and *unintended consequences*. Relevant concepts such as wild cards and the dangers of extrapolation are also mentioned. Lastly, *preferred futures* figure prominently in the texts, particularly in connection with *time horizons* [11, 31, 33].

It may be carefully concluded that some critical ideas in futures studies, such as *uncertainty* and the idea of various *futures*, have successfully diffused into other fields of academia and are also recognised amongst politicians. Other ideas, such as the belief in accurate *prognoses* and the use of scenarios need to be subject to productive criticism. Another interesting conclusion is that the analysis could not ascribe a deeper and more reflective understanding of the future to a certain group (vs. a rather superficial and/or contradictory one to another group), be it experts or MPs, different parties or different project groups. The Enquete Commission is thus found to be very heterogeneous with respect to the assumptions its members have about characteristics of the future.

Transparent dissent instead of objectivity

Many researchers have renounced the idea that an objective analysis can take place in any academic or scientific field. Since the 1960s, representatives of Critical Theory have

emphasised the influence of power relations on the research process and questioned the assumption that academics and scientists can reach value-neutral insight at all. The results of their research process are not only affected by external pressure (for instance, in commissioned studies), but even more so by “the fundamental interest that first and foremost constitutes science” [34, 35]. According to Habermas, the strive to liberate themselves from outside interests makes researchers even less aware of the inner interest driving their activity [36]. Neither do they realise how their positions in society and social structures affect their statements—Bourdieu has therefore claimed that they have a blind spot with respect to their own position [37].

Feminist critics identified many aspects of research results in social studies, but also science that were influenced by the researchers’ gender and in particular by the one-sided focus on the male perspective. Harding mentions as examples a generalisation of the traditional male dichotomy of “labour” and “leisure” that cannot easily be applied to traditionally female reproductive work [38]. Schiebinger provides many examples of how gender influences science with respect to research priorities, structures, language and criteria determining whether an investigation is even counted as scientific [39]. Lastly, academia is also criticised for its eurocentrism which prevents a complex world view—Said summarises the problems of objectivity when he points out the “highly if obscurely organized political circumstances obtaining when knowledge is produced” [40].

The objectivity discussion is mirrored in the futures studies discourse. Bell states that “there is precious little value-free science” [41]. As an example, Hideg identifies the belief in rational decision-making as a limiting influence on futures studies today and demands: “If studies of futures constitute a science, it must make values explicit, i.e. it must present possible futures together with their value content.” [42]. Other academics point out that not only researchers themselves, but also their preferred futures are rooted in their respective culture(s). Futures studies is hence “per se intercultural”, since its objective is to consider “the Other” as possible [18, 43]. Also, their own fear of the future may influence researchers’ work [28]. Bell concludes that the values and the “common knowledge” that science is based on must be made explicit and “open to critical social deliberation” [41]. In order to handle the subjectivity factor in futures studies, several German futurists also recommend self-reflection, transparency, and a critical examination of research processes and results [28, 35].

Relativism remains one strong argument against considering subjectivity in the philosophy of science. In the context of futures studies, Bell [20], quoting Weimer, warns against “a multitude of competing fictions”.

Nevertheless, the following three sub-sections attempt to investigate the productive aspects of subjectivity, taking the Enquete Commission as a model for futures studies.

Subjectivity

One of the most striking, if not surprising, results of the Enquete Commission is that there seems to have been a real epistemological interest at the beginning, which was, however, gradually edged out by party politics [12].

One conclusion could be that the results of the Enquete Commission were subjective, predictable and thus of no value to futures studies. The challenge here is to see the added value of transparency in the Enquete Commission’s texts. The minutes and, in particular, the minority votes in the final report show a clear dissent and include alternative statements and proposals. In futures studies, such a “transparent dissent” is valued, for instance in the context of Delphi surveys [44]. Grunwald even demands that the results of futures studies projects be in general presented in a way that sheds light on the lines of dissent [45].

The controversies in the report are not trivial, since they do not automatically reflect a party or coalition-versus-opposition logic. Instead they often give the interested and open reader an overview of different approaches, perspectives and ideologies concerning the respective subject. The texts and in particular the final report thus show a relation of power and knowledge. Academics and scientists that are, in the media, usually presented as “experts” (and therefore objective), are, in these texts, presented in a context of complexity and conflicting opinions. This has an emancipatory potential for readers and is particularly relevant to scientific policy advice [46].

Also, if a certain study lacks facts or only presents one perspective, this usually needs to be pointed out and corrected in an extra volume, which a reader needs to learn about and purchase separately [47]. The internet with its commentary function offers interesting alternatives—although not in a well-balanced or even violence-free space [48]. In the texts of the Enquete Commission, however, readers—or at least, ideally mature and educated readers—are given the opportunity to categorise and judge statements and thus reach a personal conclusion. There is a risk that knowledge might be instrumentalised and seem arbitrary, which will be discussed in the conclusion. But if subjectivity were made transparent in research reports as it is in the Enquete Commission texts, this may be counted as a “democratisation of expert knowledge” [49]. Not only is this relevant to futures studies—and indeed any academic field—as a matter of ethics and philosophy of science, it is also fruitful regarding academic goals. Futures studies aims to point out alternative futures and explore options. The texts of the Enquete Commission and their minority votes show the options but also the limits as seen by certain groups.

Diversity

When considering subjectivity of those producing knowledge, yet another aspect is important: one might call it representativeness or diversity. In research projects, a lack of diversity in the research team is not usually called out and even more rarely corrected [47]. It is more than an ethical problem, if, for example, perspectives of women or people of colour are not considered. Futures studies in particular needs diversity, as it requires and fosters thinking “outside the box” [50] and thus helps find new paths [42].

As the introduction to this section has shown, science and its protagonists are often merely assumed to be objective without their possible one-sided perspectives being challenged in public.

In the Enquete Commission as a *political* body, however, the lack of diversity was a subject of public criticism. This mainly concerned the members’ gender: in the beginning, there was not one woman expert among the 17 experts appointed by the parliamentary groups [11]. This was criticised by the media and individual initiatives as refraining from gender competency and ignoring female expertise [51]. This expertise and also the experience of women are considered indispensable, especially on issues of prosperity, well-being and the concept of labour [31]. Even though at times the group of MPs included 10 women, the results of the commission can still be considered less valuable, since apparently all political parties, even more left-wing ones, trusted men more when it came to expertise on issues such as prosperity and quality of life. Due to the criticism voiced in public, the experts leaving the commission were replaced by three women experts during the working period of the Enquete Commission [11]. This is, however, not nearly as much as was demanded by critical citizens and in a motion by over 100 women MPs [51, 52].

When analysing whether the apparent lack of diversity has influenced the commission’s results, several points can be made. First, when searching the final report for keywords such as “women”, “female”, “gender” and “feminist”, there are few results before project group 5. One possible interpretation is that project groups 1 to 4 (who examined the importance of growth, comprehensive indicators of prosperity and progress, resource use and regulatory policy) did not consider gender issues relevant in their fields. Only project group 5 tackles (from page 645 onwards in an 844-page report) social problems such as the “gender pay gap”, women’s part-time jobs, a new understanding of labour and the fact that reproductive work, which includes care and voluntary work and is of great relevance to a more sustainable economy, amounts to two thirds of the labour needed by society. Minority votes, mostly by opposition parties, also called out the lack of women’s perspectives in the report and added information. In fact, one

minority vote on the whole report was entirely dedicated to such criticism [11].

Clearly, diversity means much more than merely including female expertise and experience. The fact that there were hardly any migrant perspectives included in the commission’s work has only seldom been criticised in public [11, 53]. In conclusion, one may state that the Enquete Commission excludes the perspectives of more than half of the German population—as do many research groups. It does, on the other hand, have an element of self-reflection: the lack of diversity is made transparent in the report itself, and attempts were made to correct this by replacing experts, introducing two plenary sessions on gender-political aspects and more expertise on feminist perspectives on growth, prosperity and quality of life [54, 55]. Since much of the commission’s work has been made public, these corrections could take place in real time. As has been pointed out in the beginning, this is something that rarely happens in most research projects [47]. In this aspect, the Enquete Commission’s approach can serve as a role model for futures studies.

Transdisciplinarity

Another aspect of subjectivity in the Enquete Commission may be of special relevance to futures studies and its perspective on knowledge. Futurists are interested in ideas that may be influential in the future. They must, however, acknowledge the following: if an idea is powerful, (i.e. widespread and influential), this does not make it true. Neither is a true idea necessarily powerful. (One growth-related example is “rebound effects”—since research focuses predominantly on efficiency instead of sufficiency, such effects have only recently gained acceptance). Futurists should therefore be concerned with the relationship between knowledge and power.

In a technocratic model of policy advice, the assumption is that politicians more or less automatically implement the knowledge that experts have understood to be “true”. The decisionist model, on the other hand, assumes that politicians make decisions on the implementation of scientific findings based on values. Lastly, the pragmatic model of policy advice assumes that decisions are made by politicians, but based on a dialogue with experts and the public [49, 56]. It is such a dialogue that the Enquete Commission seems to embody, and its texts can be seen as the minutes of this dialogue. The question is whether the texts thus include implicit information on the chances of knowledge being implemented.

As has been discussed in the section on subjectivity, the texts show which groups or individuals consider certain scientific or academic statements as true and relevant. This is especially visible in the minority votes. If one assumes that the MPs in the Enquete Commission represent the position of their parliamentary group, the positions they voiced may be seen as a “preview” of actual future political measures. These

MPs will, after all, participate in future lawmaking and have, as Bell has pointed out, more chances than other individuals to influence the future [20].

The experts in the Enquete Commission provide factual knowledge, the MPs, on the other hand, provide knowledge related to political procedures and the positions of parties and parliamentary groups (including their negotiability). During the work of the commission, these two types of knowledge are put into relation. Thus, the Enquete Commission's texts include information on the connection of scientific and academic statements, research results, recommendations, etc. with party positions and the plausibility of implementation. This is of special interest to futures studies, since the way individuals act and decide is extremely difficult to model or foresee. Futures studies also values transdisciplinary research, which tries to activate and integrate knowledge coming from outside academia and, like the Enquete Commission, bases its work process on problems defined by practitioners [15].

The proposed value that MPs' positions may have for futures studies is exemplified in the number of future-oriented recommendations for action included in the final report. They are often connected to individual parliamentary groups -see the minority votes of the Green party and the Left party who both propose an alternative indicator of prosperity [11]. Recommendations for action presented in such a way are "possible futures together with their value content" as demanded by Hideg [42].

This view may be challenged by the question of whether existing election manifestos of political parties offer the same sort of information. This depends on the topic. Election manifestos have been shown to remain much more general with respect to growth, sufficiency and other topics that have been treated with a much more critical approach in the commission [57]. The texts produced by the Enquete Commission thus may indicate the internal negotiability of certain details and increase contingency.

Of course, no direct connection can be made between views expressed in the commission and laws approved later—but if researchers strive for future-relevant knowledge on possible laws that exceeds the information found in election manifestos and coalition treaties, the texts of the Enquete Commission are a promising source.

Conclusions and outlook

Futures studies has for a long time systematically, but also in a visionary way reflected on our ideas of the future and on what we can know. Futurists should therefore ensure that their voice is heard in political contexts such as an Enquete Commission. Thus, these bodies can learn to integrate realistic ideas of what can be planned and forecast. Futurists, on the other hand, need

to acknowledge and analyse the dominance of contradictory assumptions on the nature of the future.

At the same time, aspects of the Enquete Commission's work can inspire futurists to re-evaluate their research designs. New or modified research designs in futures studies could be transdisciplinary in that they integrate the experience of actors, but also participatory in that they include democratically elected representatives of the people. Participatory would also mean including perspectives that have been neglected so far and correcting errors made in the course of the projects. In such a research design, a transparent dissent as the result of cooperation on an equal footing would be welcome and seen as fruitful. The results produced in close cooperation with practitioners would have a greater chance (though, naturally, no guarantee) of being perceived and implemented by politicians—something that has often been deplored by representatives of the Office of Technology Assessment at the German Bundestag (TAB) [58]. That politicians are willing and able to contribute to new ideas in such an explorative *and* normative research design has been proven by the fact that members have testified to the commission's "own dynamic of epistemological interest which even crossed the boundaries of parliamentary groups" [55]. At the same time, such research designs could serve as a balance to many corporate research projects perceived as intransparent [28].

This proposal is motivated by the desire to promote academic standards—especially in a branch as new as futures studies—while at the same time using the productive characteristics of the Enquete Commission as a basis for new thought. The idea of a new research design is one amongst many. In general, the author advises challenging the idea of objectivity and confronting subjectivity with openness—but, most of all, making futures studies more inclusive and fostering the discourse on the representation of hitherto neglected groups (e.g. women) in futures studies.

The question remains whether such dissent-based research would not merely produce competing (and therefore arbitrary) types of knowledge [20]. However, this question stems from a technocratic or decisionist model of policy advice that views the political and the academic world as two completely separate spheres. If one acknowledges that power always influences the production of knowledge, a democracy being no exception, the approach to be developed here will be productive: it includes transparency about positions and dependencies as well as cooperation, while constantly negotiating boundaries. One must heed the warning that "distortions of the truth matter" [20]—yet a lack of transparency does not help to exclude such distortions today. Bearing this in mind, futures studies could greatly benefit from the inspiration provided by the Enquete Commission. The results of such approaches in research would have to be measured against the claim to be *knowledge that empowers*: the ideal of knowledge

that makes people freer and stronger to make sound decisions for the future.

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