

"I, a moderator in the Parliament of Babel"

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My job was to act as the moderator. Tomorrow's Europe gathered together four hundred people in the halls of the European Parliament in Brussels; they spoke more than twenty different languages and my task was to guide one group throughout the entire process; I was to ensure that ordinary European citizens would exchange opinions on difficult subjects such as the Union's foreign policy and the global labour market, and to make sure they would agree on one or two questions to be posed within a plenary assembly to a group of experts in this field. In other words, I found myself moderating a working group formed by about twenty people coming from Italy, France, Belgium and Luxemburg. The participants' professional experiences and political outlooks were so different that I expected the worst in terms of a productive debate. But then, having learnt to use the simultaneous translation, the participants instantly started to dialogue in a disciplined and constructive manner, emphasising the fact that languages are not such an insurmountable problem when one wishes to communicate. Explaining the rules under which the debate would take place and clarifying my role as a moderator turned out to play an important role in ensuring the success of the debate. This kind of experience in fact is based in the mediator's independent attitude with his task to facilitate the debate without expressing his own opinion or in any manner orientating the discussion. My job in fact was to broaden the debate to all participants and to avoid the discussion being monopolised by any particularly active speaker.

After working for a few years with experts on European issues, I was honestly impressed by pertinence of the argumentations and the concreteness of the issues the participants wished to address. The group discussion on quite complicated matters was facilitated by the fact that the participants used their own different personal experiences as examples to persuade others of the correctness of their opinions. The honesty and quality of the debate were also improved by the fact that each member of the group represented himself and had no specific pre-established interest to defend, and therefore none of them needed to make use of rhetorical tricks. On the other hand the sessions were brief enough to oblige each speaker to present his case in no more than two minutes.

When observing debates among political personalities, we are used to seeing meetings in which no answers are provided, or controversial issues are avoided, or even worse in which there seem to be no listening capabilities at all and no constructive exchange.

Respect for the debate's rules and an atmosphere of reciprocal cooperation allowed instead the participants in Tomorrow's Europe to achieve a good level of socialisation. In fact, in spite of the cultural, linguistic and political

differences, from the very first session national divisions were abandoned and excellent group dynamics were formed.

While the debate took place without any major problems, the most difficult aspect of my task was to guide the group towards the synthesis of the debate and the formulation of the questions to be posed during the plenary assembly. The path I followed was the one dictated by the "looping" technique, hence, at a certain point of the discussion I tried to re-present in a very explicit manner the ideas and key points that had emerged during the debate, thereby allowing the whole group to have an overall vision of what had been said. If the mediator uses this technique in a satisfactory manner, the group manages to select the most important ideas organising them according to a hierarchic classification. The clear organisation of the group's priorities consequently more easily allows a final agreement on the choice of the questions to be posed to the plenary assembly to emerge, without resorting to a vote.

During this exercise in direct democracy, the participants certainly learned a great deal about how the European Union works; they were able to compare their ideas with those of politicians from different political backgrounds and of different nationalities, but above all they experienced that even with many different languages and cultures it is possible to dialogue and build something together. The most significant aspect of the group dynamics was certainly the participants' level of curiosity regards to other European countries that set off a process involving reciprocal understanding.

"What does being a European mean?" After the Tomorrow's Europe experience, the participants will be able to answer that, among other things, it means having the capability of comparing one's own ideas and reaching an agreement with people coming from twenty-seven different countries, who speak twenty-three different languages.