Anxious politicians: Productivity imperatives in the Finnish Parliament

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ABSTRACT
This paper offers new perspectives on work cultures in politics by exploring the ambivalent connections among productivity imperatives and affirmative sociality within an under-researched group: Finnish members of Parliament (MPs). The study aim is to locate the MPs within the landscape of cultural sociology and theory, particularly in relation to the growing interest in the affective infrastructures of on-call work cultures. Drawing on 20 semi-structured interviews conducted in the Parliament House during the winter of 2018-2019, this paper contributes to the debate on the growing anxieties and pressures among the demographic group of elite professionals by analysing the Finnish MPs' daily routines and structures of feelings. This research marks a timely attempt to illustrate that affects and productivity imperatives are not external to, but are deeply embedded in, political work.

Introduction

Work cultures in which success and productivity operate through the individualised languages of flexibility, aspiration, and anticipation, have drawn much academic interest in recent decades. In a pioneering study on passionate, no-collar work, Andrew Ross (2004, p. 102) asserted that within these work cultures, work is 'experienced as *needy* rather than *greedy*'. Recent work has revealed and analysed the emotional costs of needy, on-call work cultures, especially in academic, cultural, and media work (Gill, 2014; Loveday, 2018). Despite a broad discussion on psychological strains in flexible work cultures, politicians' well-being has drawn very little research attention, with the exception of work by

psychologist Ashely Weinberg (Flinders, Weinberg, Weinberg, Geddes, & Kwiatkowski, 2020). To fill this gap in political science research, this paper builds on the critical lexicon of studies on professional work while focusing on an under-researched group: Finnish members of Parliament (MPs).

This research serves two aims: first, to present a cultural studies perspective on the analysis of politics as work in Finland; and second, to develop a nuanced theoretical approach to studying how ambivalent mixtures of productivity imperatives, affirmative sociality and social engineering modulate Finnish political culture. Drawing on twenty semi-structured interviews with MPs conducted in the Parliament House from November 2018 to February 2019, I explore the affective infrastructures of parliamentary work, which I argue are modulated not only by aspiration and dedication but also by excessive workloads, competitive work cultures, uncertainties, and social media. Politics has always been a tough job, but the ephemeral qualities of parliamentary work have intensified since the explosion of social media and 24-hour news (Crewe, 2018). To map these developing affective infrastructures, I explore the micropolitics of the Finnish Parliament, particularly the MPs' feelings, everyday experiences and techniques to survive their workloads under pressures.

To analyse this demographic of elite professionals, I build my analysis on the lexicon of cultural theory, particularly Lauren Berlant's (2008) work on sentimentalism and Melissa Gregg's (2018) recent study on the historical continuums of productivity imperatives. Berlant (2008, p. 3) has focused on affective public cultures that flourish close to 'the political', whereas Gregg (2018, p. 5) has analysed how '*techniques* (skills)' and '*technics* (infrastructure)' enable the practice of productivity within the work cultures of elite professionals. Combining these theories, I use the notion of affective infrastructures to describe the shared atmosphere that makes the MPs adjust their feelings and behaviours. My theoretical and methodological framework builds on Raymond Williams (1977, p. 132) concept of the structure of feeling as a '*social experience still in process*, often not yet recognised as social but taken to be private, idiosyncratic, and even isolating, but which in analysis […] has its emergent, connecting and dominant characteristics, indeed its specific hierarchies'. My analysis shows how affective infrastructures enable and disable productivity, and drive the MPs to develop new productivity techniques amid an endless fight against exhaustion, public pressures, and the evils of inefficiency.

This paper first reviews the contextual background of the turbulence in Finnish politics during the Sipilä government of 2015-2019. Next, I

provide an overview of the interviews, including a brief methodological note, and address the question of why we should pay attention to anxious and precarious feelings among elite professionals. I then describe how the MPs use different techniques to ensure their productivity in Parliament. This analysis centres on three themes: the art of productivity, sensible sentimentality, and social engineering. I briefly analyse how these techniques are modulated by the complex technosocial fabric in which political work merges with social media. Finally, I issue a call to extend the understanding of political decision-making under pressure, and a call to explore how to use previous research on cultural theory to grasp how affective infrastructures modulate the subjects within them.

Turbulence in Finnish politics

After the April 2015 elections, Prime Minister Juha Sipilä's cabinet formed a centre-right coalition consisting of the Centre Party, Finns Party, and National Coalition Party. The government's strategic programme, outlined in *Finland, a Land of Solutions* (2015), favoured austerity, wage cuts and workfare initiatives to boost national competitiveness (Adkins, Kortesoja, Mannevuo, & Ylöstalo, 2019). Unsurprisingly, throughout the government's term, the politics of austerity created a tense atmosphere between the Sipilä cabinet and the Central Organisation of Finnish Trade Unions. Unusual tensions emerged also within the cabinet: in the summer of 2017, the populist Finns Party split into two groups due to internal disagreements between the old Finnish Rural Party centre-leftist populist tradition and the new radical-right anti-immigration faction (Hatakka & Välimäki, 2019). Twenty MPs, including Finns Party ministers, formed their own group, Blue Reform, which continued in the government. Despite a debate on holding new elections, the government went on, wobbling like a three-legged Aalto chair with one leg cut in half (Palonen, 2018).

The tensions continued until Sipilä dissolved the government only a month before the April 2019 elections, as it became impossible to finalise market-driven healthcare reform before the elections. Sipilä, a reformer, wealthy entrepreneur, and former chief executive officer who described his own management style as 'results or out' (Kauranen, 2019), had no choice but to resign. The market-driven healthcare reform faced heavy scrutiny not only from constitutional lawyers (Palonen, 2019) but also in public discussions which were critical of econ-omising political decision-making and visualising the prime minister as a

CEO (cf. Davies, 2014, p. 112). Amid this criticism, the Social Affairs and Health and the Constitutional Law committees shuffled a draft memorandum on the reform between themselves until it became clear that the reform could not be implemented. My interviewees discussed these tensions, and many MPs experienced the technocratic leadership style of Sipilä's cabinet as highly problematic and stressful. Indeed, nearly all the MPs mentioned that the Social Affairs and Health Committee experienced unbearable pressures, to the point that the Occupational Safety and Health Committee had to step in to stabilise the workload. Moreover, the national newspaper *Helsingin Sanomat* reported that the reform caused a burnout epidemic in the Social and Health Ministry (Teittinen, 2018).

My interviewees did not explicitly reveal how all this turbulence influenced the atmosphere in the Finnish Parliament, but previous research has shown that work cultures in which the emergency is the rule (Thrift, 2000) may cause psychosocial catastrophes that manifest in chronic stress, anxiety and exhaustion (Gill & Donaghue, 2016). Furthermore, public discussion turned to burnout in politics in March 2017, when Minister of Justice and Employment Jari Lindström (Finns Party) had to take ten days of sick leave to normalise his blood pressure. Afterwards, his position – described as unbearable from the very beginning of the government's term (Ijäs, 2017) – was divided, and Antti Häkkinen (Coalition Party) became the Minister of Justice. Soon after, Green Party chair Touko Aalto announced that he was stepping down due to burnout (Palonen, 2019). Ex-minister of Family Affairs and Social Services Juha Rehula (Centre Party) later admitted in an interview that he had been working at the limits of his endurance (Miettinen, 2018). Despite widespread public interest and somewhat sympathetic media discussions, none of these top politicians won in the April 2019 elections, provoking speculation about the connections between publicly admissions of work-related exhaustion and the risks of losing re-election.

However, it is worth noting that the power relationships also changed in the 2019 April elections, characterised as the centre-left Social Democrats' comeback: the Blue Reform MPs and ministers failed to win any seats, and the Centre Party experienced a massive defeat. If it was a comeback, though, it was a fragile one, as the Social Democrats defeated the Finns Party by only a marginal difference. At the time of writing, it seems that tensions, especially between the right-wing populist opposition and the green-left alliance in the government, continue to create uncertainty within Parliament. It is too early to speculate whether Finland faces a new normal of fragile governments, but as I write only six

months after the elections, the Social Democrats have replaced Antti Rinne with Sanna Marin as Prime Minister, due to mistrust from their coalition partner, the Centre Party. Although it is impossible to accurately examine these current pressures, this paper marks a timely attempt to illustrate how uncertainty, productivity imperatives, and intensified public pressures, modulate the affective infrastructures in Parliament.

Tracing the affective infrastructures in Parliament

Before beginning this research, I revisited C. Wright Mills (1951/2002) classic work on the American middle classes. In the introduction, he writes that 'the first lesson of modern sociology is that the individual cannot understand his own experience or gauge his own fate without locating himself within the trends of his epoch and the life-changes of all the individuals in his social layer' (Mills, 1951/2002, p. xx). Reading this passage pointed me to the need to draw a rough sketch of the affective infrastructures of the contemporary Parliament, to analyse the pressures under which the MPs work, in order to grasp the developing structures of feeling. To analyse this environment in which expectations can be nearly overwhelming, I contextualised my close reading of the interviews with recent insights from Finnish political scientists (Raunio & Ruotsalainen, 2018; Seo & Raunio, 2017) and international research into the pressures that create feelings of inadequacy and exhaustion among politicians (Flinders et al., 2020).

My research on MPs' work pressures faced many methodological challenges, the first of which was practical: recruiting interviewees. To my surprise, though, it was easy to recruit the MPs for the interviews, and I soon realised that the timing was good: in the winter of 2018-2019, the MPs were able to reflect on the end of the government's term and share their thoughts on the upcoming elections in April 2019. When recruiting the interviewees, I explained that MPs from all political parties, including representatives from several positions, would participate in the research, and I would ensure full anonymity for the participants. While selecting the interviewees, I took the government-opposition dynamic into consideration, recruiting half of the twenty MPs from the government and half from the opposition.[1] Fewer than five of the MPs had been elected recently, more than half had experience in leadership positions, and six had worked as ministers.

The interviews lasted between forty and ninety minutes, which presented a tricky methodological challenge: to establish trust in an hour

with professional talkers who did not easily let people underneath their surface. Similar methodological concerns were raised by sociologist Anna Kontula (2018), a Left Alliance MP who published self-reflective ethnographical research on the unspoken rules in Finnish parliamentary work. The research included semi-structured interviews with sixteen MPs, and in the methodological appendix, Kontula (2018) proposed that her insider status, although potentially problematic, was the only possible position from which to conduct such research. From this perspective, my research was doomed to failure from the start: I did not have any informal connections to Parliament, and my research was not long-term participatory ethnography allowing for informal discussions. Nonetheless, I felt that I was able to create a relaxed, open atmosphere in the interviews as I ensured the participants' full anonymity. This starting point unfortunately precluded analysing important perspectives such as the interviewees' age, gender, political party, and current position. My analysis was partial by necessity as I could not ignore ethical issues; in the relatively small working community of the 200-member Finnish Parliament, it would be quite easy to recognise individual interviewees by their position.

To contribute to the relaxed atmosphere in the interviews, I asked very general questions focused on the MPs' everyday routines and experiences: their working hours, anxieties, insecurities, feelings of exhaustion, (im)possibilities of maintaining work–life balance, relationships within Parliament, and online and offline interactions with citizens, voters and the media. I also very clearly stated that my aim was to analyse whether the MPs' experiences exemplified broader trends in professional elite work cultures, such as coping with constant distractions and the feeling of losing control. I had the impression that the interviewees interpreted my curiosity as neither intrusive nor biased but, instead, felt that I was sympathetic, apolitical and on their side (Crewe, 2018). Although well aware of the suspicions about elite interviews and the possibility that the interviewees might offer only 'politically correct' views (Kantola, 2020), I nevertheless wanted to assure the interviewees that their answers would not be analysed as an archive of privilege or stereotyped as the experiences of a leisured elite perceiving themselves as more hard-working than everyone else.

Paranoid reading and the 'hermeneutics of suspicion' (Sedgwick, 2003, p. 124), though, have been the dominant theories in political elite research, so my reparative analysis could be seen as naïve, pious, or complaisant. Critical researchers indeed may find it rewarding to obtain evidence of already known power relations, but recently, political science scholars

have called for new theoretical inquiries concentrating on the unpredictable, messy side of politics (Geddes & Rhodes, 2018). Although initially uncertain about the reparative research approach, I gained confidence in it in fall 2019, when I presented a draft version of this paper to the parliamentary speakers, experienced MPs, and top-ranking officials in Parliament, at a formal meeting considering the need to rearrange parliamentary work due to the increasing workloads and pressures. My presentation received positive responses precisely for the theoretical and methodological approach, based on anonymous interviews, and close readings of repeated discursive patterns exemplifying the shared feelings generated by the growing pressures.

Many Finns state that they have relatively little trust in politicians (Rapeli, 2014, p. 63), so MPs, particularly backbenchers, are suspected of exaggerating their workloads. International parliamentary studies, however, have indicated that politics is qualitatively and quantitatively one of the hardest professions: MPs typically work more than fifty hours per week (Weinberg, 2015), and the *demand-side* pressures of the job have increased without improvements in the *supply-side* dimension (Flinders et al., 2020). I have no reason to think that the Finnish MPs' experiences or daily workloads dramatically differ from these international findings, and although the ways in which the MPs reflected on their work heavily depended on their position – being a party chair was different from being a newly elected MP in the opposition – they *described* and *felt* the pressures in surprisingly similar ways. For instance, they commonly thought that recently elected representatives experienced psychological strain before they learned how to navigate Parliament (cf. Weinberg, 2012). Politics has no formal training or guidebook on how to be successful, so I saw a need to draw a rough map of the productivity imperatives and feeling structures deeply embedded in political work to get a sense what governing under pressures means.

Anxious political elite

In the Finnish parliamentary system, the MPs, who serve four-year-terms, are from one single-member electoral district and twelve multi-member electoral districts. The Finnish electoral system is the most candidate-centred in Europe; more competition occurs within than between parties, and many MPs lose their seats to intra-party competitors (Raunio & Ruotsalainen, 2018). Although precarious, politics, unlike many other non-contracted forms of such work, compensates for risk

with relatively good salaries, expense compensation and adjustment allowances, which unemployed former MPs may claim for a maximum of three years after the end of their terms.[2] Previously, the allowance was an adjustment pension, created in the 1960s, but in 2017, a successful citizens' initiative to eliminate the pension system emerged, using the Citizen's Initiative Act, which was passed in 2012 in response to the open government movement, and typically utilised to address issues such as animal rights and same-sex marriage (Seo & Raunio, 2017). The initiative against the adjustment pension, however, was a counterblow to the government's workfare policies; in an interview, Joel Rouvinen, a citizen behind the initiative, bluntly stated that 'since the MPs appear to want to activate the unemployed, they can activate themselves, too' (*Yle News*, 2018).

At the time I conducted the interviews, the heated discussion on the MPs' benefits was ongoing. It came up frequently, and seemed to cause frustration in the MPs, who considered their political careers to be very precarious because, as one politician stated, 'politics leaves a burning mark to your forehead'. In the interviews, I did not use the language of precarity to avoid influencing the participants' choice of words (cf. Loveday, 2018), but I soon realised that the political elites also sensed the feeling of an unpredictable present. One interviewee provided a useful context for these precarious feelings by explaining the informal discussions within Parliament:

> Many of my colleagues are extremely hurt by this [the discussion on the adjustment pensions]. I know people who have been offered great jobs, but they have wanted to continue here because this is more important. Now, when the adjustment pension is gone, you don't have the security anymore, and perhaps you would have chosen differently if you had known. […] Also, this limits what we dare say because now we have to worry where we can find work after this. […] This is a very serious problem for our democracy.

This experienced MP worried that talented young people might not run in future elections due to the financial risks, high publicity and risky campaigns. Precariousness among the political elite should not be conflated with the material precarity experienced by low-paid workers, but it is interesting how anxiety over the future works indirectly: it channels the elite to secure their positions in increasingly unpredictable labour markets (Aarseth, 2018; Davies, 2017; Kantola, 2020). It is worth pondering, then, how the *sense of precarity* modulates the political elites: do they become more restless, anxious, flexible, or even hyperactive?

New elite studies has presented similar concerns, arguing that diminished stability in institutional ecosystems modulates elite networks into rhizomatic configurations (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987) in which players move and adopt multiple roles (Wedel, 2017). Similarly, Finnish elite research has shown that in recent decades, the elite structure has changed, becoming more inclusive than exclusive and more horizontal than vertical, decreasing the coherence of the elites (Ruostetsaari, 2016). These changes may partly explain the increasing movement of MPs from parliamentary work to communications agencies and think tanks. In particular, the MPs early in their political careers explained that politics is not necessarily a vocation or a calling, but an expert position from which one *should* move to another position that employs one's acquired skills, knowledge, and networks. This shift from politics as a vocation, to politics as precarious expert work, offers the starting point to my analysis, approaching the MPs as flexible professionals struggling with multiple pressures and anxieties about the future.

The art of productivity

The media often pictures parliamentary work as leisurely, filled with chatting, networking, and taking in free dinners. This image creates clickbait, but in reality the daily routines of the Finnish Parliament, especially in the spring and autumn, are scheduled, often with overlapping meetings. Ideally, the MPs attend committee meetings and plenary sessions organised four times a week from Tuesday to Friday. On Monday, the MPs are expected to visit their 'home turf' (Raunio & Ruotsalainen, 2018, p. 40) to keep up with regional matters in the electoral districts they represent, and to participate in the municipal councils on which most also serve. Although the plenary sessions are public, the 'actual decisions', as all my interviewees explained, are made by the sixteen committees that prepare all of Parliament's decisions and reach a quorum when at least two-thirds of their members are present. The MPs generally belong to two committees, which hear experts, debate, and prepare laws behind closed doors. This system is a common feature of Nordic parliaments based on 'the advantage of trust-based negotiations' (Seo & Raunio, 2017, p. 625). However, new demands for open governance have emerged, and even some experienced MPs I interviewed stated that the committees' work should be more public, so people can understand how political decisions are 'really made', and see which MPs are actually present and active in discussions.

Furthermore, the MPs need to travel in Finland and abroad, read papers, keep in touch with citizens via email and social media, write press releases, give interviews, and be active on their home turf to learn about local issues and inform their constituencies about their work in Parliament (Raunio & Ruotsalainen, 2018). Obviously, it is impossible to manage all these overlapping tasks or do everything according to the ideal schedule even though the parliamentary office hires approximately 100 assistants, distributed differently by the parties to assist the MPs in their daily tasks. Thus, during the interviews, it became clear to me that the key to survival in Parliament is to accept that it is impossible to control everything. As one MP stated, 'you need to learn how to set the limits' as 'the work is insatiable', and 'you can kill yourself over work'. Reflecting on similar issues, another MP described the situation as 'a horrible job for a conscientious person'.

Indeed, similar to academia, work in Parliament can be seen to easily absorb all elements of life, creating anxiety regardless of the MPs' level of seniority (Loveday, 2018). All the interviewees raised the problems of setting limits, and one MP aptly described the ambivalent, conflicted nature of the job:

> One reason [for burnout] is that you cannot delve deeply into all things like, for example, all this evidence-based knowledge as there is so much of it that you can only scratch the surface. […] And then there are all the things that citizens and non-government organisations would like us to consider, but we just don't have the time. […] On one hand, everything is on your table, but then again, on the other hand, you need to focus on certain topics to be able to concentrate on at least something. That is the conflict. […] And so, on every vacation or in any free time you have, you always have a bad dilemma. It is very ambivalent as you want so much to have a break, but then it is so difficult to relax or feel that you have earned your vacation.

To survive others' needs, constant interruptions and distractions, and challenges juggling competing tasks, the MPs must learn performative techniques enabling them to embody productivity (Rai, 2015). Nonetheless, the MPs seem to face time-management issues closer to those of working mothers dealing with others' constant needs than the top managerial elite striving to realise their full potential. The MPs' art of productivity thus lies on a historical continuum with early twentieth-century guidebooks teaching housewives to become experts in household engineering while preserving their good temper (Gregg, 2018). The art of productivity in Parliament, in other words, should appear to be effortless.

The constant juggling of multiple tasks and roles also results from structural reasons. Finns vote for individual candidates, but the government consists of a party-dominated coalition in which whips ensure party discipline (Wiberg, 2014). Consequently, work in Parliament requires the MPs to follow numerous unwritten hierarchical rules and procedures, to secure their own futures and achieve political impacts. As the interviewees explained, the art of productivity demands constant attention to others' moods, as well as adhering to the rules:

> Here is a specific hierarchy […] like at university, you know. […] And it can be quite harsh. Actually, as a workplace, this reminds me a bit of the army or university. On one hand, you have a lot of freedom, but on the other hand, it is like in the military. But it's ok […] You just need to understand your place.

The multi-party parliamentary system seems to create tensions among the voters, electoral promises, and political decision-making. Resentful disappointment with politics has often been cited as a reason for the success of populist parties among the lower classes, but in research on wealthy Finnish entrepreneurs, Kantola and Kuusela (2019) observed that wealthy Finns also characterise politicians as useless and unproductive. Unsurprisingly, MPs struggle in this low-trust, high-blame environment that issues conflicting demands to create a unique personal brand that is not *too personal*. Whereas elite professionals may achieve powerful positions by acting as 'disruptive mavericks' (Ekman, 2019), the MPs need to make themselves indispensable, recognised and applauded in the eyes of the voters, the media, and their colleagues. Indeed, the MPs seem to find it difficult to figure out how they should perform their productivity to make *everyone* aware of it:

> I work like crazy, and I really appreciate all the feedback I get from citizens, and I would really like to reply to them all, […] but I just don't have enough time and resources. […] It is impossible to meet citizens and do the job well in here. You have to make choices. And even though I am industrious and hardworking, I often hear from my own colleagues that my work is not visible enough. […] Sometimes I feel that perhaps I should work less and promote myself more. Perhaps that would be better.

Constant struggles with conflicting and impossible demands often create a compulsive relationship with work. Only one interviewee used the characterisation 'workaholic', but all the interviewees emphasised a puritan work ethic in which work gains religious status, whereby 'idleness is an unnatural and evil evasion' (Mills, 1951/2002, p. 216). As Melissa Gregg (2018) put it, the obsession with productivity imperatives creates a

vicious cycle of sin and confession: those with time-management problems are sinful and need to save themselves from themselves by confessing, practising abstinence, and finding the path to salvation through increasing their productivity. The MPs, though, can never be productive enough, so this scenario evokes feelings of ambivalence and unease that merge sentimentality with rationality, as discussed in the following section.

Sentimental sensibility

A compulsive relationship to work can develop, especially among professionals who regard their work as political and moral project (Mannevuo & Valovirta, 2019; Skeggs, 2008). I suggest that one reason for the exhaustive repetition of acts in politics lies in the culture of true feelings that idealise people with moral feelings, and the capacity to respond to the sufferings of the less fortunate. The concept of true feelings was developed by Lauren Berlant (2008), who applied it to analyse the ambivalent intimate publics in which sentimental moral psychology effectively drives social change, but also flourishes in proximity of the political without a clear accompanying political ideology. The cultural tradition of true feelings influences the Finnish political culture, which holds that the ideal politician is a rational person who is guided by common sense, but is also socially intelligible, affirmative, and sensitive.

In Finnish cultural repertoires, the emphasis on rational sensibility manifests in the construction of egalitarian ideals, particularly those used to draw boundaries between hard-working ordinary citizens and the leisured elite (Kantola & Kuusela, 2019). This boundary-making explains the MPs' near obsession with stressing how 'ordinary' and 'like everyone else' they are, most often exemplified by living in 'an ordinary middle-class neighbourhood', as one MP put it. This performative boundary-making aligns with Mike Savage's (2000) finding that the elites contrast their positions with those above them, and Gregg's (2008) observation that politicians who have a public image of being ordinary occupy a powerful position authorising them to speak on behalf of other 'ordinary' citizens. Boundary-making is not necessarily strategic for the MPs I interviewed. They seem to have a genuine interest in affirmative sociality, contrasted to the attitudes of the flawed elites, 'the others' who do not care about citizens' sufferings.

Even when affirmative sociality resists the power hierarchy, it has its own performative markers including words, scripts and speech (Rai,

2015). Indeed, Finnish politicians typically begin speeches with stories about meeting citizens with problems, and often, these encounters may really have occurred as individual citizens frequently contact MPs about personal concerns (Raunio & Ruotsalainen, 2018). The performative scripts of speeches turn these meetings into compassionate moments when politicians develop a sentimental awareness that becomes a motive for transformative practice – in short, a shared feeling turns into political action (cf. Berlant, 2008). I do not argue that sentimental politics are mere rhetoric, but as my interviewees stated, these encounters are affective encounters that modulate their parliamentary work. Many MPs even said that they sometimes feel like social workers or psychologists. One interviewee explained:

> I think I could say very harshly that we are doing a kind of social work or even psychiatric work. […] And this is something that I think belongs to us. […] When I came here, I thought that this kind of citizens' helpline thing would have diminished, but it has not.

Regarding the idea of politicians as social workers or psychologists, I noticed that the MPs (perhaps unintentionally) seem to distinguish between the affirmative politics conducted by 'them', or ordinary politicians, and those performed by 'others', or the economic elite uninterested in the wellbeing of the ordinary people. This form of sentimental politics spares the MPs the emotional costs of being decision-makers, but problematically also tends 'to save the political from politics', by embracing the affirmative collective sociality through compassion (Berlant, 2008, p. 145). Paradoxically, the culture of true feelings thus functions as a self-preservation mechanism against the emotional costs of others' sufferings. Such strategies are clearly needed in 'very stressful' work in which 'you feel like a criminal just because you exist', as an interviewee put it.

Open, intimate relationships between politicians and citizens are highly valued in Nordic politics but have remained an under-researched topic (Seo & Raunio, 2017). Yet, my interviewees indicated that one reason for the MPs unease is the demand from the intimate public – including social media – for the daily, repetitive performance of acts to establish their trustworthiness as more humble, moral, caring, and hard-working than others. As one interviewee stated, the MPs feel as if they are 'in a dog school' where 'if you make a minor mistake in your life, you will be publicly humiliated'. Consequently, the interviewee continued, 'you can never let your guard down or be too relaxed', which, in turn, *limits* communication:

> I don't think anyone here is as self-secure or tough as they let people imagine. We are all sensitive in our own way, and we suffer for it. […] If you lose that sensitivity, you don't sense important feelings or criticisms, but you just put everything into the same box to get everything out of your sight. That is not good.

The limits for communication are already set when the conventions of affirmative sociality expect the MPs to always able to be professional, rise above their emotions and respond to the sufferings of the less fortunate. Indeed, the MPs seem to regard themselves as middle managers who should act as self-regulated mediators between resentful citizens and the state. Feeling management labelled as 'emotional labour' (Hochschild, 1983) is generally considered to be a risk for burnout (Flinders et al., 2020), but politicians are expected to juggle conflicting loyalties and demands on a daily basis. These expectations put stress on the MPs:

> Within this job, you are never on holiday. Sometimes, some drunken idiot calls me on Saturday evening and complains how we have such long holidays. I remember when I once laughed at one caller and said, 'Do you understand that at the moment I am on a holiday, but still I am listening your stupid bleating?' I would love to be on a holiday.

When the MPs are expected to rise above their feelings, they embody an ideal of professional competence with an emotional twist. As analysed in the following section, this ideal is built on a strange mixture of sentimental drive, a puritan work ethic, and social engineering.

Social engineering

Nordic democracies have a long history of relying on pragmatism, or willingness to adjust and compromise. In the political history of welfare states, this technocratic social planning is often referred to as 'social engineering' (Etzemüller, 2014), or evidence-based politics coordinated by experts with 'anti-political' stances: the selected best practices are framed as apolitical, rational solutions (Marklund, 2010, p. 62). Politics is filled with messy, conflicting interests, but social engineering turns policymakers into experts seeking knowledge instrumentally (Peck & Theodore, 2015; Rose, 1991). Consequently, volatile environments encourage evidence-based policy-making as it gives an impression of certainty, although reality may be filled with complexities: 'the more evidence we have, the more we know about conflicting interests' (Crewe, 2018, p. 26). Politics, though, allows no room for hesitation, speculation, or weakness, especially amid conditions of uncertainty.

When the affective infrastructures of decision-making are built on the illusion of rationality, the MPs are expected to act as empathetic, professional administrators whose true feelings may flourish in proximity to the political but are not mixed with political reasoning. The MPs' professional self thus entails cognitive dissonance as they are expected to be like any other person – worried, exhausted, and emotional – but also able to rise above others. Indeed, the construction of MPs professional self should be 'predicated upon anxiety rather than in spite of anxiety' (Loveday, 2018, p. 161). Yet, despite the pervasive contemporary therapy culture, none of the MPs interviewed thought that talking openly about their anxious feelings, especially work-related exhaustion, made for a good strategy:

> There has been some discussion about that [work-related exhaustion], which is good as perhaps then other people will also have the courage to talk about that. But then again, it also makes us vulnerable as then people say that we are just too lazy, and we have all these benefits, but we just complain. I feel a bit uneasy talking about that publicly.

I consider this statement to be an example of the ambivalent expectations of politicians. The MPs seem to recognise the reasons and signs of political burnout, but they do not want to raise the issue publicly as it makes them vulnerable. The idea of rationality requires that politicians be dedicated social engineers who are always on call to make decisions and are never too tired, emotional, or exhausted to address the challenges of an uncertain world:

> There is this kind of ambivalence in this job that has never been discussed, and it makes me frustrated. Everyone wants us to be very honest and open, […] but I would like to keep my privacy. […] But then again, people also want role models who can, for instance, talk about work-related exhaustion. So, yes, this is, this is very ambivalent, and this, this is again a kind of complaining perhaps I shouldn't do because then I forget to say how much I love this job. […] This is super challenging, super interesting, and super important work through which you can actually make an impact on society.

Without question, the MPs are highly dedicated to their work, so it is impossible for them to not to, as one interviewee said, 'sometimes react with feelings'. Indeed, politics is filled with bodily performances 'embedded in social relations' (Rai, 2015, p. 5), which may cause psychophysical reactions such as headaches and sleeplessness. One MP, for instance, described how unpleasant public experiences affect the body: 'if something like that seems to happen again, I start feeling really bad.

[…] I have a headache, and I feel very primitive anxiety connected with a feeling of guilt'. In an example of a psychophysical stress reaction, another interviewee told about a moment of extreme tiredness when it became impossible to remember how to do normal routines: 'it scared me. […] That kind of blackout is not a very nice experience'.

Political rationality creates highly ambivalent emotional realms where feelings flourish in proximity to the political, but the political must also be saved from these feelings. This idea of rationalism, which originates from industrial and military history, holds that calmness and inner strength are important characteristics of the modern professional – whether manager, soldier or social engineer – whereas neuroses and psychopathological symptoms are seen as signs of irrationality and constitutional weaknesses (Biess, 2014). This dichotomy of rationality and irrationality is still alive and well in political performances in which young women, in particular, are strictly evaluated amid suspicions that they may not remain cool or professional under pressures.

Ambivalence of connecting

So far, I have analysed the unresolved conflicts between true feelings and social engineering. Next, I turn my gaze to the complex dynamics of social media, which I approach as a relatively new but influential affective infrastructure through which affects and political work modulate each other. Indeed, others strongly influence the MPs because in their daily use of Facebook, Twitter and Instagram, they – paraphrasing media theorist Tero Karppi (2018) – engage with a larger social whole modulated by social media platforms' profiling, predictive analytics, and suggestive algorithms. At the same time, though, the MPs I interviewed celebrate authenticity ('being true to oneself') and integrity ('not being influenced too much by others') as the most important characteristics of a good politician.

To my surprise, the interviewees did not mention the manipulative aspects of social media. Instead, the MPs have very practical relationships with social media, especially Facebook, which they consider to be an excellent tool to connect with citizens. The search for cost-effective means for communication exemplifies a trend towards personalised representation (Raunio & Ruotsalainen, 2018), encouraging the MPs to inform voters about their actions, whereabouts, and personal thoughts. My research did not generate data to analyse how social media influences the micropolitics of Parliament, but the MPs, especially the younger ones, seem to use

social media to evaluate their popularity, and at least some political parties create formal and informal rankings of the MPs based on their social media activity, followers, and likes. Thus, a personalised social media presence should also be seen as a component of the parties' communication strategies (Gunn & Skogerbø, 2013). Although time-management and self-help guidebooks frame the ability to disconnect as a key to productivity and well-being (Gregg, 2018; Karppi, 2018), political culture greatly values social media activity.

The MPs described Facebook as an especially useful tool for unmoderated communication between politicians and citizens. However, media scholars have questioned this idea: if a user makes a brief comment on a politician's posts, and a conversation develops between them (which rarely happens), it may lead to a different path on which the users communicate with each other, sometimes even exchanging personal insults (Ross & Bürger, 2014). Furthermore, research, for instance in the United Kingdom, has indicated that misuse of anonymous social media accounts has intensified harassment of MPs, especially women (Flinders et al., 2020). Similarly, my interviews indicate that in recent years, adversarial relations among political groups have increased hate speech, and across genders and political parties, the MPs recognise hate speech as an exhaustive, gendered, selective, expanding phenomenon. This result accords with a recent study finding that hate speech is deliberately used to create political pressures, most often on women working on equality and immigration issues (Knuutila, Kosonen, Saresma, Haara, & Pöyhtäri, 2019).

My interpretation is that social media, particularly the hatemongers who use it, strengthens existing relationships instead of creating new ones, and thus has powerful impacts on public decision-making processes. The MPs, however, seem to almost accept hate speech as part of the job. As an MP who is very active on social media put it, 'it is the price to pay if you want to save democracy'. However, I propose that there exists an urgent need for political scientists to analyse this complex technosocial fabric from new perspectives that consider what happens if – as Gilles Deleuze (1992) predicted – societies of control no longer construct the mass/individual pair but, instead, construct 'dividuals' constitutively modulated by social networks, rendering them connected but also vulnerably to manipulation (Cheney-Lippold, 2011). Consequently, it is worth asking how problematic it is that the MPs regard Facebook, for instance, as a 'strategic tool' for their own individual purposes, but also criticise 'traditional' media as too selective, unpredictable and even untrustworthy. In

addition, there is room for feminist analyses to understand how hate speech modulates the affective infrastructures in Parliament as the female MPs seem to experience dual pressures to accept intimidation as part of the job while staying cool under pressure.

Conclusion: The amazing resilient politician

In this research, I have sought to explore the affective infrastructures of the Finnish Parliament and to contribute to the analysis of needy work cultures by focusing on the MPs' experiences. My analysis of semi-structured interviews with twenty MPs offers a timely perspective on the contexts of policy-making processes with a nuanced view on the affects, feeling rules, and pressures experienced by the Finnish MPs. The MPs are often considered as a privileged elite, but I choose to follow a more reparative path to open up discussions on politics as highly demanding work with exhaustive performative elements. To do so, I have characterised the MPs as a group of dedicated professionals driven by a puritan work ethic infused with productivity imperatives that create their feelings of unease.

At this point, it remains speculative whether Finland is shifting to fragile governments, but populism and social media platforms seem to form a complex technosocial fabric that modulates the affective infrastructures of Parliament. My analysis of these infrastructures has been selective by necessity, as I have sought to investigate *shared feelings* with the aim of finding a new perspective to analyse Finnish political cultures within a matrix of cultural sociology and cultural theory. This matrix has been used more often to analyse academic work, and we, as academics working under pressure, can relate to the experiences presented in this research – at least to the MPs' talk about 'bouncing back' and 'spring [ing] through' hard times by banning negative feelings (Gill & Orgad, 2018). Indeed, in a contemporary fashion, the MPs stressed the advantages of 'having good resilience' and 'teaching oneself some mindfulness' to learn to be 'like, whatever, this is part of the job'. This 'whatever' attitude is a sensible perspective to enable productivity under pressure, but it also endorses the idea of the rational actor as a survivor who overcomes emotional upsets and adapts to states of emergency. In politics, this work culture reinforces the idea that feelings may flourish in close proximity to the political, but should not be mixed with rational politics – a highly problematic idea because affects are deeply embedded in political work.

Notes

1. Ten interviewees were from the National Coalition Party, Centre Party, Blue Reform, and Finns Party (which moved to the opposition in 2017), and ten were from the Social Democrats, Green League, Left Alliance, Christian Democrats, and Swedish People's Party.

2. Starting with the 2019–2022 government term, MPs are paid a monthly salary of 6,614 euros, rising to 6,945 euros after four years of service, and 7,408 euros after twelve years of service. This pay is taxable income. In addition, MPs receive compensation for expenses ranging from 987 to 1,809 euros a month depending on where they live and whether they have a second home in the Helsinki metropolitan area. MPs are also entitled to travel free of charge by rail, scheduled flight and coach in Finland and taxi in the Helsinki metropolitan area for purposes related to legislative work. The former adjustment pensions amounted to approximately 3,000 euros per month, and MPs were entitled to adjustment pensions if they had been elected to Parliament before 2011 and had served for at least seven years. In 2019, the adjustment pension was replaced by an adjustment allowance. Depending on the length of time served as a representative, this allowance is paid for a maximum of three years after a representative leaves office. The recipient's earned and capital income affect the amount of the adjustment allowance. For more information about the Finnish Parliament, see https://www.eduskunta.fi/EN/pages/default.aspx.

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