

ABSTRACT

What is the role of domain experts in crisis times? How do experts advise and interact with policy makers, stakeholders etc.? Not only during Covid-19, but also during the financial crisis and other turbulent times, experts, policy makers and stakeholders sit at the same table.

On the occasion of the ninth Otlet Salon, our two honorary speakers, Prof. Mathias Dewatripont and Philippe De Backer, cast their light on the recent crisis and how policymakers and experts should prepare for crises ahead. They speak openly about the friction between politicians and scientists, the influence of speed on decision making and public opinion, the need for diversity at the table and scenarios for the future. We round up with advice fit for a romantic relationship: speaking the same language, keeping the communication lines open.

INTRODUCTION AND SPEAKERS

For the ninth edition of the Otlet Salon, we return to the relatively safe environment of our private internet connection. Due to a rise in covid cases in Brussels, our two honorary guests share their visions on several societal topics from the comfort of their homes, focussing on the covid pandemic.

Or how crisis and improvisation are intertwined.

But first! A lengthier introduction of our guests than you're used from us. They both have an extensive background in- and outside politics and operated at the heart of major recent crises. Without further ado we present:

MATHIAS DEWATRIPONT

- Professor of economics at ULB, and has obtained his PhD at Harvard university.
- His work on contract theory, organizational economics, innovation and banking and finance has been widely published in top journals, and one of his long-term collaborators is Nobel Laureate Jean Tirole.
- Laureate of the Franqui price in 1998
- Executive director and vice governor of the NBB, its representative at the Basel Committee on Banking Supervision and Supervisory Board of the European Central Bank
- He is co-director of the ULB Institute of Interdisciplinary Innovation in Healthcare, and became member of the GEES, the Belgian Group of Experts on the Exit Strategy from

covid-19-induced lockdown, and since December 2020 he is member of the GEMS, the Belgian Group of Experts on the covid Management Strategy.

- Above all, he is an inspirational and warm colleague and mentor at our department ECARES

and

PHILIPPE DE BACKER

- Obtained a PhD in biotech at Ghent University.

- Active in politics since an early age, including LVSF and Liberales, and later president of Jong VLD Nationaal.

- Became a Member of European Parliament in the ALDE group, and resided in several committees like the Transport Committee and the Economic and Monetary Affairs Committee, and the EP Intergroup on Long Term Investment and Re-industrialisation, and the Intergroup on LGBT rights

- Has been Secretary of State for Social Fraud, Privacy and the North Sea, and Minister of Administrative Simplification, Digital Agenda, Postal Services and Telecom

- Has played a key role in the Covid-19 crisis when coordinating the supply of face masks

- Recently he has returned to the private industry, and became independent member of the BoD at Unifiedpost.

Or how crises benefit from a diverse background paired with expertise.

A MODERATED CONVERSATION IN FOUR CHAPTERS

Speed, uncertainty and translations

We delve right into the core of our subject by asking if there's a difference between how politics and domain experts interact before and after the covid-crisis, if we have applied our lessons learned and if we are prepared for the next unforeseen crisis.

Philippe De Backer (PDB) explains domain experts always are and have been his first stop. "You need an overview of the field you're trying to influence as policy maker." He explains with an example from his time as minister of the North Sea: "There were geologist, marine, fishermen, biologists, etc at the table, to cover every aspect of what is 'North Sea.'" He emphasizes that the 'boots on the ground' are an essential ingredient of this delegation, as well as theoreticians. This might sound simple and logical, but it takes time: building the network, understanding the different stakes, making decisions.

When in crisis, this fundamentally changes: there's no time to be thorough. Science and politics become opponents, mirrored by the need for decisions vs the uncertainty of the situation. In times of crisis the friction between scientists and politicians becomes very clear: "Scientists describe the world, politicians describe it as they would like to see it."

PDB's strategy to be prepared for a crisis: "I've always tried to have a broad network, to get diverse information as fast as possible, knowing that insights might change the next day." Other ingredients are flexibility, the courage to bypass normal stakeholder management and grabbing opportunities.

Our **moderator (M)** nuances an earlier remark. "Many scientists also see the world as they would like it I think." **Matthias Dewatripont (MD)** continues on this line of thought. "Economists also want to change/improve the world. What makes this normative ambition difficult: economics has important political consequences, as has climate science. Most criticism on these experts stems from political reasons." Also: experts like to take the long view, while in crisis you (also) need short term solutions. "Although there are academics that are willing to follow the political agenda. I think the

system needs alterations. What we need are positions that help translate the academical to something more practical."

An example from his time on the high council of finance: "This was a political position. We didn't say things that were bad news for the government." With GEES / the covid-crisis, listening to the experts is deemed more legitimate than during the financial crisis. There's always a risk of both experts and politicians finding themselves not influential enough. "Publicly known experts are helpful, but at the same time it is the government that needs to make the decisions. It happened at the beginning that politicians wanted us to say what they wanted to do, against the expert advice, and that was not good. Nowadays the advice is published, giving more transparency, even if the government does not follow it - and they don't need to obviously in a democracy." On a positive note: "After the early months there is much more peace between the two groups. Although everyone typically prefers to bring good news of course. Maybe there is gradually a new, better balance in the public role they each need to play?"

War Exercise

Now this crisis has somewhat abided, we look ahead and wonder if a set of experts and politicians is ready to sit at the table when the next crisis hits.

MD: "You always fight the last crisis. Ideally you learn from your mistakes, but when new challenges come, god knows... Climate change is in a sense different because it's in slow motion. Then there is the phenomenon that some governments only act when their back is against the wall. They will act faster against covid than against climate change, even though we have big events like this summer (the flooding) that wake people up."

PDB agrees with MD. "We need to work on a European level to prepare for challenges ahead. We need generic crisis management by learning from the last crisis and have a better response by asking ourselves: who does what, who is responsible, how to operationalize. Different players need to get to know each other, we need a free flow of information and short communication lines. The role of experts becomes advisory, providing options and scenario's."

Then he makes a highly interesting remark. “I was in politics for ten years and I never did a war exercise. Departments that deal with crises, like fire fighters, exercise. Politics should do that too.”

As for the role of Europe, our speakers agree: it might play a large part in providing structures and scenarios, in bargaining for member states, but there is a lot to progress on. **PDB**: “After every crisis you see the need for more Europe. National governments don’t want to let go, though they do understand collaboration will bring them prosperity and safety.” **MD** remarks that where common interests are bigger, the member states will harmonize. Considering vaccines, he says “it was crucial that Europe negotiated on behalf of the member states.”

Dealing with Public Opinion

Our speakers are presented a quote by Erika Vlieghe (Professor infectiology): “Academics have to provide scientific insights; politicians have to make choices.”

PDB agrees. “It’s a rule of law that a strong parliament is necessary, and stronger than all the different parties.” He warns for the much talked about technocratic government though: “People envision like-minded people in that position, but that’s not how it works. Besides, having them elected makes them politicians.”

He returns to the advise given earlier on: installing a process that involves all parties, focussing on what needs to be done. Extra advise: don’t read the newspaper too much if you’re trying to deal with changing opinions and an unforgiving public.

MD underlines it’s tough to be a politician and, in general, to be exposed in the media (ref virologist Marc Van Ranst who had to be guarded in a safe house). Beyond that on experts vs politicians: “If you rely on unelected experts to take decisions, they need a very clear and focused legal mission: independent judges should not write the law but implement it, a Central Bank should implement monetary policy but not decide on its overall objective, etc.”

PDB notes that concerning the corona-crisis crisis structures were in place but they didn’t work because the people inside them couldn’t agree / cooperate. “You need to put the right

people in place in order to get to decision making.”

Advice for the Future

We round up with advice fit for a romantic relationship: speak the same language, keep the communication lines open, keep talking to each other.

PDB: “It’s all about preparation. When facing a crisis you need people who can translate scientific advise into political language. Also: preparation, a flexible mindset and a clear hierarchy of labour. A central command that takes decisions.

In my political years I would ask my administration to come to me with both a problem and a solution. Often externals only come to highlight problems, I cannot base decision making on that alone”

MD, after agreeing, adds “learning to know one another in peace time will reduce decision time in crises. And I encourage people going back and forth between expertise en politics during their career.”

QUESTIONS FROM THE AUDIENCE & DISCUSSION

On mixed profiles

MD: looks a bit further into the need for mixed profiles. “There are many people interested in political topics. The question is whether you want to appoint them. In Belgium we could do with hiring from outside politics.”

He explains why. “Our administrations are politicized, you need a go-between layer. But, we don’t have a culture of revolving doors, people bringing other backgrounds into politics, not a culture to acknowledge the expertise from the other. The US Operation Warp Speed is a healthy example with more independence.”

On defining ‘expertise’

We return to the topic of diversity around the table by defining expertise. “Not all experts are academics”, a participant points out.

PDB: “Like I said in my opening, I asked fisherman around the table for their expertise. What’s lacking when you talk to academic experts is that they speak from models, while in crisis we need to operationalize problems.”

Concluding: expertise comes in many forms, that's why you need multidisciplinary teams.

On getting information (across)

A member from the audience wonders if there's anything experts can do to make politicians listen to them, assuming they're not willing and/or lack understanding.

PDB points out general confusion: "People think politicians don't listen when they don't agree, but listening and agreeing are not the same thing. In the Israeli government there's a rule of six people in a committee, one always having to disagree with the decision to keep alternatives open."

MD adds there are many reasons why a decision maker decides to agree or disagree.

Another question about information, or the access to it. How do experts handle the gap between knowing there's information but not being able to get it?

PDB mentions the information flow goes both ways, and that Belgian politicians are very accessible. "Sometimes we do have access to inside information, sometimes we don't, for example because it's confidential because it's still being researched, or when data's not open or available in the right format. Again, it's a question of how to present it. But people usually respond when you ask for information from a political role."

MD has a different experience. "In crises like this it helps to have more information. The government wasn't reluctant to give it, but it's true that when the crisis is new, the info you want is not directly available / complete. The GDPR is often used as an excuse. Without a conservative interpretation of the rules, a lot more things would have been possible. In other cases it's a good safe guard."

On training and management

Referring to the aforementioned war exercise, someone wonders what's more useful, training the politicians, or the administration.

PDB: "Both. At a political level you need to grow risk sensitivity." He illustrates with the example of a mission to China posing a great safety risk with the use of the 5G network. "I bought a new phone while most colleagues just brought their normal stuff, making themselves vulnerable. Like soccer players

need to train daily, we need to learn to anticipate on these situations."

He considers improvisation a very useful exercise. "Allow administration to come up with a solution, grant the public service some trust - the opposite of normal conduct. A military planning should be installed. You also need to think ahead, so it's a juggle between short and long term.

Crises can be influenced by who's sitting around the table", he concludes.

MD Observes a hiatus in the title of tonight's Salon. "A word that is missing from the title is 'managers'. One of the problems is having enough managers who have the right skills. When crisis comes, their skills are very important. At the bank for example, people start their career as experts. At some point you need managers, leading to internal promotions. We can improve skills by having more managerial training in 'peace time' or by outside hiring, from the private sector. We need diverse forms of expertise at the public functions on all levels, and good managers to delve into this potential, especially during crisis times."

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