

# Adapt or Perish: The Social and Material Conditions of the Transformations of the French National Assembly Over the Past Century

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## **Adapt or Perish**

### **The Social and Material Conditions of the Transformations of the French National Assembly Over the Past Century**

07 November, 2019

Panel “The Governance of Parliaments”

by Jonathan Chibois, IIAC (EHESS-CNRS)

The French National Assembly declares that it is experiencing a pivotal moment in its existence. Since the beginning of 2010, the successive presidents of the Assembly have displayed the same ambition to rejuvenate the institution. They indeed have been proclaiming that they intend to respond to the citizens’ dissatisfaction, who feel excluded from state affairs, and deceived by elected representatives, whose motivations do not appear as disinterested as it might seem. They have also insisted on securing the independence of legislative work from the executive power. The beginning of the current legislature in 2017 was marked by strong actions in this regard. [Five work groups](#), bringing together parliamentarians from all sides, were set up to propose the most relevant reforms that should be implemented for the institution, on such central issues as the status of MPs, the status of their staff, the monitoring and evaluation of public policies, the rights of the opposition, etc.

It should also be noted that this concern for transformation is closely linked to the emergence of digital tools. For instance, an online amendment tabling application was imposed upon MPs to improve the efficiency of the Assembly’s work (2007). Furthermore, to make parliamentary debates more visible a video on demand (VOD) portal dedicated to parliamentary activities has been made available online (2010). One last example: to promote the voice of citizens an electronic petitions system is close to be deployed on the Assembly’s website (2020). There are many such examples and they are not original: [all these initiatives can also be observed in other parliaments around the world](#).

As a matter of fact, like its counterparts, the French National Assembly is presently attempting to exploit the opportunities offered by digital tools to reinvent itself, both to fix the link between the French people and their representatives, as well as to affirm its own place within state

institutions. In such a perspective, the Assembly attempts to establish itself as the main guarantor of actual popular sovereignty, according to the original ideals of French democracy. For this reason, one could indeed consider – as the title of this conference suggests – that the Assembly might have “come of age”.

### **Elements of a socio-technical history of the Assembly**

However, the results of my doctoral thesis challenges this claim. The current project to modernize the National Assembly and to give it a new maturity does exist, but this is not the first to do so. It must be placed in a long series of punctual transformations that the Assembly has experienced in its history, since the Revolution, which has induced that it has had to redefine its position. And each time, at least for the most significant of these moments, it had to integrate a new communication technology into its operations and procedures to transform itself.

In recent decades, there have been at least three such moments. The most recent dates back to the turning point of the 1970s and 1980s. At that time, absenteeism and non-involvement of MPs were the object of constant controversies. To address these critiques, the Assembly decided to invest in aiding MPs in their daily tasks, which it had never agreed to do before since each MP was left to provide for their own needs. The Assembly then expanded its real estate assets to offer them a personal office inside the Palais Bourbon, and allocated them a budget for recruiting a personal assistant. It committed itself to providing them with effective means of communication. For instance, the live coverage of “Questions au gouvernement” was introduced, following the example of the British Parliament’s Question Time, so that ministers could be held accountable to the people and their elected representatives. Another example is the inauguration of a videotex service, so that the information circulates better from the Palais Bourbon to MPs dispersed across the country.

The second episode dates back to the late 1950s, when the current Constitution of the French Republic was drafted and adopted. The context was thorny: indeed, the previous constitution that France adopted at the end of the Second World War had proved incapable of ensuring stability of power, and, on the contrary, participated in deepening the political crises linked to decolonization and the Algerian War. That is why the current constitution enshrined the superiority of the executive power over the legislative, which certainly stabilized the state but forced the Parliament to rethink its place and role in French society. It is in this context that the Assembly replaced the traditional voting procedure by an electronic system, which required MPs to use a personal key, and therefore be physically present in the Palais Bourbon to cast their vote, the essential prerequisite to fulfil their mission of controlling the government. It was also to counter the executive power that the Assembly opened its doors to television cameras, so as not to let the Government alone benefit from the former state monopoly on television and radio broadcasting.

The third moment is even more remote in time, it corresponds to the last two decades of the 19th century, at the time of the foundation of the Third Republic, which represents a watershed in French parliamentary history. It was first of all the moment when the state apparatus formally streamlined and structured itself, as we know it today. It was secondly marked by the introduction of the universal male suffrage for legislative elections, which opened up the Assembly to the citizens from all social classes. In this context, the “work of representation” became more professional, turning into a full-time activity that could be carried out not only by the wealthiest but by anyone. Both questions of the efficiency and inequality of resources among MPs then arose, which led the Assembly to scrutinize their material and financial work conditions. Notable results were the introduction of a wage for MPs and also [the installation of collective telephone devices at the Palais Bourbon](#). Such communication tools were very popular with MPs of all conditions, who found thus a means to articulate their commitment to their constituencies and Paris alike.

### **The transformation of the Assembly, a perpetual movement**

At these three moments (but not only them), French parliamentarianism stood at a crossroads. The pressure exerted by a changing French society led the Assembly to adapt its terms of existence. At the end of the 19th century, French society indeed freed itself from a monarchy that had left little latitude for the legislative power, and Parliament was placed at center of the state. At the end of the 1950s, on the contrary, the new constitution significantly weakened the legislative power. In the early 1980s, French society then grew increasingly suspicious of the parliamentary institution and tended to challenge its legitimacy to represent the people.

In each of these three moments, the technical issue turned out to be central in the elaboration of a solution to overcome the crisis. This is mainly due to the positivist ideology that permeates French society, and even more its political staff and the administration of the state, whose underlying idea is that political, societal or institutional issues have to be solved by technical solutions, in the name of a so-called progress, neutrality and efficiency. It is therefore no coincidence that each time the Assembly has experienced an existential crisis, a technical innovation arose: in the standards of this institution, it constitutes the favoured panacea.

But let us return to today’s so-called “digital revolution”, my purpose is not to minimize the Assembly’s current transformation. It is simply to point out that, profound as the modernization undertaken by the Assembly may seem, it will never definitively solve the problem of its anchoring in French society. The will underpinning the present modernization is just another cycle in a longstanding dynamic, driven by the continuous evolution of French society. As a result of this dynamic, Parliament must always advocate its legitimacy and protect the extent of its power of action, even though in France the principle of representative democracy is firmly established. Such a situation, as we have seen above, could be provoked by two different

situations: on the one hand, the instability of the balance of state power, and, on the other hand, the evolution of citizens' expectations.

Finally, it should be noted that, if the Assembly considers the new communication tools as means of ensuring the sustainability of its existence, it seems rather blind to the fact that such tools are also factor of instability. Anthropology has indeed taught us that if any new communication technology offers solutions, it also brings about new uses, new working configurations and therefore, in the long run, new expectations that institutions cannot ignore. It thus appears that by working to control its future by betting on technological innovations, the Assembly sows the seeds of a future crisis. In other words, the Assembly appears to be caught in a logic where it cannot ensure its position as a state institution without weakening it at the same time. This makes the Assembly, in the long term, not a rigid and fixed institution but, on the contrary, fundamentally a flexible and dynamic one.