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Political Scientists as Politicians and Public Officials: Luca Martinelli

Luca Martinelli is an official of the European Commission. After completing his PhD in Political Science in the University of Florence in 1995, he undertook research at the University of Bologna (Centre for Public Policy Analysis in the Department of Organization and Political System), on projects related to public administration and public policy analysis. In 1997 he joined the European Commission, working first in Public Health Policy and then (since 2001) in Information Society and Media. He then worked as Policy Officer for Digital Libraries, Open Data, and Public Sector Information within the Information Society and Media Directorate General, before taking up his current role as the Assistant to the Director General of the Publications Office of the European Union in late 2012. His experience as researcher and policy practitioner ranges across issues as diverse as environment, transport, public health, broadcasting, ICT research and deployment. His current research interests focus on the policies defined by the Digital Agenda for Europe (DAE), the Commission strategy to deliver social and economic benefits through ICT.

IPS: Can you briefly describe your typical tasks and working day? Are you happy in your current job?

I have been working as Assistant to the Director-General of the Publications Office of the European Union since 2012. This is a position closely associated with the operational management of an organisation of about 600 staff and with an overall budget of € 130 million. Our mission is to produce, to publish and to provide access to the publications and official information (e.g. legislation) of the European Union institutions. These tasks are rapidly changing in the context of the digital revolution, and more and more of the services that we provide are web-based and paperless: for example, since 2013 only the online edition of the Official Journal of the EU is authentic and has legal value. Within the Commission, DG Assistants (often referred to as "Policy Assistants") are a typical "staff function" charged to support and advise the Director-General on any possible matter. My daily tasks therefore include taking part in management and senior management activities and strategic discussions, both internally and at interinstitutional level. The Publications Office is governed by a Management Board where all EU institutions (Commission, Council, Parliament, Court of Justice, etc.) are represented at the level of Secretary General. Strategic orientation, as well as management and negotiation skills are important in my job. Although the mission of the organisation is clear and well defined, the political, institutional and technological environment in which we operate is changing rapidly and is often uncertain. This makes my current job both challenging and very interesting, and I can definitely say I am happy to work for the EU citizens in this position.

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IPS: Is your job the result of a tenaciously pursued project, or rather of an opportunity you seized? Had you planned this type of career whilst you were studying because you were attracted by it, or rather is it the result of a later choice? Did studying Political Science matter?

I started studying Political Science at the University of Bologna in 1985 with the idea of becoming a journalist. Coming from the *Liceo Classico*, I was fascinated by the concept of "polis", the public good, and I liked writing. While studying, I progressively enlarged my range of future professional options. What interested me was the political phenomenon, in particular its policy and public administration dimensions, which could be approached from different professional angles. While working for my PhD I had, of course, also considered the possibility of an academic career. In the mid-90s the chances of a research position in an Italian University were rather poor, unless one was ready to accept scholarships and temporary positions which could last for many years.

After completing my doctorate in 1995 I therefore applied for, and succeeded in, competitions for posts in public service organisations both in Italy and at European level. My first postdoc job was at the Council of the Autonomous Province of Trento, the legislative assembly in my region of origin. I was the official responsible for one of the permanent legislative committees (Environment and Land Planning) and for a special inquiry committee. Although rather short (I worked there for less than two years), this was an enriching and very interesting experience, as one could really observe a "micro" political system in action. In 1997 I was then hired by the European Commission, as a policy officer at the Public Health Directorate in Luxembourg. Since then I have changed job and department every 5 years on average within the Commission.

Internal mobility is highly supported as part of the human resources policy for management and sensitive functions. My academic background was instrumental in allowing me such changes of policy area. After public health, I worked as an evaluation officer in the context of the research framework programmes, and then again as policy officer in the area of the digital agenda for Europe (access to cultural and scientific information; public sector information; open data), until I was offered my present position in 2012. Having a background in Political Science has been really important, both in terms of providing a successful "knowledge key" for my initial recruitment and also for facilitating my move to different positions throughout my career.

IPS: People you work with often have a different educational background. What are the competing academic backgrounds in your working environment? Do you perceive you have an advantage/disadvantage vis-à-vis these colleagues? What does such advantage/disadvantage consist of?

The academic background of the administrator-grade employees of the European Commission is very diverse. Besides those with a qualification in Political Science, there are also lawyers, economists and linguists. There are also many other specialised profiles, such as engineers and Information Technology specialists, which I have particularly encountered both in my present job at the Publications Office and in my previous job at the Information Society and Media Directorate General (now DG CONNECT). A considerable number of my colleagues at the Public Health Directorate (my first appointment), were medical doctors, epidemiologists and public health specialists. Although I am not particularly keen on the distinction between

"generalists" and "specialists", I would place myself in the former group – although I like to consider myself as a specialist in public administration. Moreover, I believe a key feature of a performing administration is to strike the right mix between the different types of competence required. As regards the advantages that a background in Political Science brings, I would mention: understanding the general context, complexity analysis, flexibility and adaptability. One disadvantage is perhaps the dependence from domain-specific knowledge.

IPS: Is there anything not written in textbooks that you have learned thanks to your work experience, and that you would recommend should be taught to politics and policy students?

I had a comprehensive exposure to and understanding of empirical approaches to politics, society and organisations before I started work within the sphere of public administration. I was therefore quite familiar with concepts like unexpected consequence, perverse result, organised anarchy, implementation gap, etc. The perception of a hiatus between what is taught in books and the reality experienced when working is probably more obvious for a law student. The only recommendation I have would be to encourage traineeships for master level students, so that they get exposed the reality they study at an earlier stage.

IPS: Can you identify who has an academic background similar to yours on the basis of his/her approach to problem setting and problem solving? Or rather do you think that other differences/similarities (e.g. personality, political orientation, other peculiarities) matter more than academic background?

In my experience, I would say that "education matters" particularly in the way problems are set, conceptualised and analysed. However, I have doubts that academic background can be a predictor of the type of solutions that are proposed to a given problem. Probably other factors play a more important role in this, for example being more or less creative and innovative. My experience at the Commission concerns rather technical policy domains, and I can say that political orientation does not appear to me as an important variable to explain the approach to problems. The most relevant factor is probably the mix of competences that are brought to the game, as problem solving at Commission always stresses interdisciplinary approaches and team work.

IPS: How would you re-organize (if needed) courses in Political Science (including its sub-disciplines) in order to structure a curriculum that could naturally lead to your current job?

In my opinion, the undergraduate and graduate courses which fall under the general grouping of Political Science disciplines that are offered by Italian universities are incredibly rich and diversified. The situation has changed dramatically since the second half of the 1980s, when I took my old "Laurea". At the time, the offer was rather simple: five specialisations were possible after the first year common core: sociology, history, economics, international relations and public administration. At PhD level, we normally referred to three sub-disciplines: 1) political theory/political system; 2) international relations; 3) public administrations/public policy. I chose the last area both for the Laurea and the Doctorate.

I do not have sufficient knowledge about the results of the Italian university reform process to formulate any specific recommendations as to how it should be reorgan-

ised. I believe the process of diversification of the offer is probably irreversible, but in general terms I tend to have reservations about excessively specialised approaches at first degree level.

I am personally in favour of a solid, common and interdisciplinary academic basis at first degree level, followed by more specialised and profession-oriented master level. A master level degree that could have naturally prepared me for my career at the Commission might have been labelled "European institutions and policies" or "European administrative studies".

IPS: Should Political Science scholars "get their hands dirty", i.e. intervene more in politics and policy making, so that they gain in relevance? As far as your activity domain is concerned, is it possible to distinguish easily between technical knowledge on the one hand, and political values and policy preferences on the other?

This is the dilemma, "social engineering vs ivory tower syndrome". I personally was always more interested and fascinated by the "practical side" of politics and by the possibility of using knowledge to produce socio-economic and environmental results and impacts. This is probably why I went for public policy and public administration studies, and why I have chosen a policy practitioner career. At the same time, I think it is neither necessary nor possible to provide behavioural recommendations for Political Science scholars.

As for the "facts vs values" issue, I believe it is possible to distinguish them. At the same time, as I mentioned before, the policy areas in which I have worked have been rather technical, and it is quite rare that political preferences play a relevant role in my work. Certainly the traditional "right-left" continuum is less relevant than the "pro- vs anti-European integration".

IPS: For a Political Science scholar who wants to be active and produce an impact on policy making, is it easier to do it by studying the policy process or rather by being fully part of the process as decision maker?

My feeling is that by becoming a decision maker (e.g. by engaging directly in politics or public administration), the scholar tends to lose social recognition as a source of independent knowledge, and therefore he/she loses an important power resource. I tend to conclude that it is easier to do it by studying the policy process.

IPS: What is the added value of the Political Science scholar to the job of policy practitioner? And, vice versa, how is the profession of policy practitioner improving the academic work?

Keeping the two sides in connection is difficult but necessary; I see mutual benefits if this is done correctly. The practical side would gain in terms of the quality of the decisions and evidence-based policy making. The research work would improve its societal relevance, although not necessarily its quality. At the Commission there is currently a strong emphasis on evidence-based policy, including the use of social sciences. I would like to signal the fellowships initiatives available to Commission administrators to keep in contact with academia: the EU fellowships consists of an annual programme offered by many universities around the world, most of which are in the US. It includes the Weatherhead Center for International Affairs at Harvard and Yale University, as well as the European University Institute in Florence. I am Policy Fellowship Alumnus at the Centre for Science and Policy, University of Cambridge.

IPS: What are the disadvantages of mixing up theoretical knowledge and "practice"?

I see no disadvantages as such. It is rather a question of time, resources and how the mixing up is done. The policy practitioner is often result-oriented, and it is very difficult for him/her to align with the stricter methodological requirements of the academia. The quality and independence of science should not be diverted by the imperatives of the practice.