

Kansanedustaja

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Shaping the Information Society: The role of Parliaments and Legislators

Ladies and Gentlemen, Dear friends,

I have the great honour to be able to give some basic information on the Committee for the Future in the Finnish Parliament. First of all the Committee is unique in the world.

In Finland 15 years ago, some of our Representatives had the insight that establishing a committee to deal with the future would be one means of revitalising the Parliament from within. Like the other special committees, it has 17 members, and it discusses parliamentary documents that are referred to it. The Committee studies development factors and development models relating to the future. It examines futures research. It assesses the social impacts of technology and acts on the international level as a parliamentary body that evaluates the role of technology. It is a form of parliamentary "think tank".

The Committee is free to choose other tasks and functions - beginning with definition of themes - itself. Working methods vary depending on the theme and project. Some themes demand a thorough, scientifically based study, others are best tested out on the political level by arranging a seminar. Sometimes the problem in question is so difficult, the theme so new that it demands the commissioning of a preliminary study from a university and only then the Committee's report and statements of position.

The Committee neither concentrates on preparing legislation nor reviewing the government's annual budget proposal, but in other respects it resembles the other committees. What makes it different is the nature of its functions and its new field of tasks. Its task is to conduct an active and initiative-generating dialogue with the government on

major future problems and the means of solving them. Each of the standing committees has its corresponding ministry, and in the case of the Committee for the Future this is the Prime Minister's Office.

It has become established practice for the Government to make 1-2 reports on the future in the course of a four-year parliamentary term. Five Government Reports, with five Parliament responses, have been handled in this dialogue on the future. The first, presented by the government in 1993, dealt with Finland and its relationship to changes in its operating environment. The next government submitted two reports: one in 1996 on the future of Finland and Europe and another in 1997 on Finland's economy, the Finnish employment situation, science and technology in Finland, the Finnish environment, and the country's general wellbeing. In 2001 the Government formed after the 1999 elections submitted a report on the future with regard to regional development. The outlook for demographic development, production and employment over the next fifteen years were the particular focus of examination in this report. The last Governmental Future Report at the end of 2004 was named Finland for people of all ages, dealing with demographic trends, population policy, and preparation for changes in the age structure. Parliament gave its answer on in 2005.

The Committee has drafted a relatively lengthy (over 100 pages) report of its own in response to each of the five Government Reports. Each of the committee's response documents, with minor additions, was adopted by Parliament after a debate at a plenary session.

The new Government has announced that the next report on the future will deal with climate change and energy.

The committee has made active use of its power of initiative in defining its own work. After every election the agenda of each new committee takes shape in the minds of the 17 parliamentarians elected onto it. The topics discussed by the committee have ranged from the global to the local, from values to the practical efficiency of the machinery of State, from left to right, from history to the future, from structural long-term economic problems

to the everyday difficulties that families have in arranging child care, from statistics to weak signals. The only rule in setting an agenda has been that it has to be something that is new and important to people. Topics in the information society development that the Committee for the Future has highlighted include the future of work in Finland, the future of the Finnish knowledge society and regional innovation systems. Other parliamentary committees can name their representatives to the steering groups of the projects.

The current Committee has chosen to focus on the following issues:

1. Finland renewing herself through learning - the challenge of metropolises and new general educations
2. Taboos of the welfare model, "sacred" misconceptions
3. Forests, the future of using them and food
4. Opportunities and risks of nanotechnology
5. Global challenges of food production
6. The EU's eastern and southern neighbours
7. Power and marginalisation
8. RFID - Radio Frequency Identification
9. Participatory content production / open operational paradigm
10. End of parliamentary term: 10 challenges for the future of Finland.

I am personally a chairman in the project handling the future of forests, food and water. In this context we handle also the actual food-problem from the point of view of climate change and biomaterials.

The powers of the Finnish Parliament are as in any other Parliament. They can be divided traditionally into legislative and budgetary but as the example of the Committee for the Future shows nowadays also into visionary. The Committee for the Future was created to strengthen the visionary aspect - the modern aspect of power.

The Committee makes also statements - normally at the end of handling some principal report. Some examples. In the energy sector the Committee has had an active role in

changing the common attitude - and the opinion of the whole Parliament - to nuclear power from negative to positive at the time when all other European countries were very critical (most of them closing nuclear power stations). The Committee was one of the first in the country to have an opinion on globalization. The three scenarios outlined in the report Russia 2017 were a real success in the Finnish political debate. Statements on information society ended up to the new program of the Government after the elections in March 2007. The report on structural problems of the health-care system was so in time when during last winter nurses started to put a brake on their weak salaries and working conditions.

Ladies and gentlemen!

The biggest challenge of the development of the Finnish information society is to rebuild the new services and prevent the digital gap between the elders and young people.

We want to put our energy on developing the future in the strong, lasting way.

Visions, scenarios, values and long-term perspectives - they are not normally on agenda of members of Parliament. In the Finnish Parliament we have a forum for that.

Thank you all!