

Chapter 4.37

Parliament and E-Governance in Finland

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INTRODUCTION

The Standing Committee for the Future in the Finnish Parliament has a motto: *It is the duty of parliament to observe the changing world, analyse it, and take a view in good time on how Finnish society and its political actors should respond to the challenges of the future. Democracy cannot be realised simply by accepting changes that have already taken place.* Indeed, parliaments have a role in e-governance all over the world, and this role will be discussed briefly in this article with a reference to the case of the Parliament of Finland.

BACKGROUND

Why are parliaments important? The information society and e-governance are on agendas all over the world. Every nation tries to jump into the knowledge-based society as quickly and as deeply as possible.

In November 2004, the World Bank organised a seminar on “e-Governance: From Successful Pilot to Sustainable Implementation” in India (Bangalore). One hot topic, especially in the debate in the press, was the effectiveness of this

new and promising development aid called e-governance. Evaluation of development aid is not easy, but it seems that e-government initiatives in developing and transitional countries have not been particularly successful. It has even been calculated that 35% are total failures, 50% are partial failures, and only 15% are successes. There is no actual evidence that e-government failure rates in developing countries should be any lower than those in industrialised countries. But there are plenty of practical reasons to support the idea that e-government failure rates in those countries might be much higher.

One basic mistake has been that politicians, as decision makers and opinion leaders, have not been really committed to e-governance. For them, it has been just one issue of technology among others in line, not really their business at all. Still, e-governance, as with any other part of governance (Tiihonen, 2004), is not a task for experts—it is a matter of common interest, together building a better future for people.

What kinds of models concerning building e-government or e-governance, are in the world for the active use of politicians? Not many, but Finland—and, in this case especially, the Committee for the Future in the Finnish Parliament—offers one of these. The role of parliaments is the same

all over the world: to reactively handle proposals for legislation and annual budgets given by governments. But, can a parliament be a forerunner and an active player for a new society? Yes. This can happen in Finland, where, in 1906, women were the first in the world to get full voting and candidature rights, which can be an explanation for why, after 100 years of this kind of great social innovation, the same Finnish Parliament was the first country in the world to decide that our common future is so important that politicians also have to take real responsibility for it.

The Committee for the Future was established at the beginning of the 1990s and functioned on a temporary basis from 1993 until 2000. Then, on December 17, 1999, in conjunction with adoption of the new constitution, Parliament decided to grant the Committee for the Future permanent status (<http://www.parliament.fi/FutureCommittee>).

The Committee for the Future in the Finnish Parliament has the same status as the other standing committees. 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. From the very beginning, all 17 members of the Committee have been parliamentarians. Its current tasks are defined to be I) to prepare material to be submitted to the Finnish parliament, such as government reports on the future, II) to make submissions on future-related long-term issues to other standing committees, III) to debate issues relating to future development factors and development models, IV) to undertake analyses pertaining to future-related research and IT methodology, and V) to function as a parliamentary body for assessing technological development and its consequences for society (Arter, 2000).

POLITICS: FOR OR AGAINST NEW TECHNOLOGY, NEW THINGS?

Politics in this context is about values, attitudes, atmosphere and opinion building, and, not for-

getting the most important, opinion leading. Normally, politics is against new technology and generally against change. It is said that voters do not always want all these new things. But in the Finnish case, the case is just the opposite, which is why politics is needed—to support new ideas, and, among them, new innovations and new technology (Tiitinen, 2004).

For the past fifteen years, we experts have told that in the New World—at least in the New Economy based on Information and ICT, on Knowledge and Wisdom—the role of the state and parliament no longer holds importance. Governmental tasks will be minimised, if not diminished all together. But again, the Finnish case has proven something else. On the contrary, the role of the governments in the new e-world or u-world is changing, but it is certainly not getting smaller. Without active participation by governments and parliaments, really useful, effective and economically valuable e-services—public and private—will never succeed. The state's role is to provide an enabling environment for the new development and support new initiatives for efficient economy and competitiveness. The state—in practice parliaments—have to take care of “fare play” among different players in the information society. In Finland, Parliament has to make sure that citizens have equal possibilities also in the e-governance.

In Finland, Parliament has taken an active role. Some examples: the state has for 50 years been responsible for equal school and education possibilities for all citizens which means free of charge education system from bottom up. The level of education, the strong input in polytechnics and engineering, have later supported the telecommunications R&D development. In the period of the last depression (at the beginning of the 1990s) the public policy incentive was to strongly increase R&D funding from public resources, which was just the opposite policy than in most countries. Today, the private sector is the major financier of R&D. The technology policy and the national strategy to build Finland as one of the

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