

Parliament and E-Governance in Finland

Paula Tiïhonen

Parliament of Finland, Finland

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 (Tiïhonen, 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 forgetting 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 leading information societies have enhanced the use of ICT, both in public administration, private business and every walk of life in society (Klus & Kalscheuer, 1997).

In general, and also in the knowledge economy, good governance without corruption plays an invaluable role. Institutions, both administrative and political, really do matter, even if we think that we are moving from governing to governance (Tiihonen, 2004). It is a fundamental task of parliaments to make sure that there are reliable, well-functioning and innovative governments, ministries, and other basic public institutions.

Here is one more example from Parliament. In 1997 the Committee for the Future was given a second official principal task, that of assessing the effects of technology on society. The following reasons were named as evidence that a need for assessment work existed:

The argument that there is a need for technology assessment in the Parliament can be justified in two ways. The accelerating development of science and technology is having substantial effects on society, economic development and the life of the individual. Technology assessment helps parliamentarians understand these influences better and take them into account in political decision making. The other justifying factor relates to Parliament's tasks and democracy. When legislative and budgetary proposals of significant importance for society are submitted for its consideration, Parliament must, if it is to be able to exercise oversight of the Government's actions, already have a good enough foundation of knowledge on which to assess these proposals.

Technology assessment linked in one way or another to parliamentary work has proved itself to be a successful solution in several European countries. What is meant by technology assessment in a parliamentary context is appraisal of the effects on society of using the results of scientific research and technology. The questions and needs stipulated by the parliament provide the point of departure. Technology assessment generally encompasses broader sectors of science and technology, such as biotechnology, mass communications, transport, energy, and so forth. From the very beginning, the Committee for the Future has examined technology and such phenomena of change in the structure of our society as globalisation, innovation, and governance as a development feature permeating the whole of Finnish society.

However, in Finland, one centrally important deviation from other parliaments was made right at the beginning. No unit independent of Parliament has assumed responsibility for technology assessment, as has been done in Germany, for instance; instead, the task is performed by the committee itself so the 17 Members of the Parliament sitting twice a week 2-3 hours in meetings. To support its work, the committee can commission studies from various research institutes or think tanks.

Some examples. It was 5 years ago that Parliament of Finland, while analysing Finland's future prospects, highlighted innovation, with special emphasis on its human aspects. With this respect to these challenges and opportunities the Committee decided to write a report on knowledge management at the level of politics and policy making (Suurla, Markkula, & Mustajärvi, 2002).

The subject of one of the most recent technology assessments was the Finnish knowledge society model—more specifically, its sustainability in its second phase (Himanen, 2004) The person invited to do the background research was Dr. Pekka Himanen of the University of California at Berkeley where Manuel Castells is a profes-

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