

Establishment

The Finnish Government is a proactive political actor. In taking the demands of long-term futures into consideration, it makes proposals to the Parliament. The Parliament is a source of binding decisions and further initiatives, and it contains 16 committees that act as preparatory units. One of these units is the Committee for the Future.

The Committee for the Future was established as a temporary committee of the Finnish Parliament in 1993. The Committee arose from an initiative made by Members of Parliament (MPs) with the aim of developing a national foresight system against the background of the recession in Finland in the early 1990s. Currently, futures thinking is broadly and deeply rooted in Finnish society. The versatility of the Finnish national foresight system is of a standard that is rarely seen anywhere else in the world. These include developments of technological advancements in general, the enhancement of futures studies as a scientific discipline, and the revitalization of institutional future-orientation. Consequently, the quality of the available futures studies concepts, tools and methods is better than ever before.

Organisation

In 2000, the Finnish Parliament recognised the permanent status of the Committee for the Future, granting it the same high profile as the standing permanent committees. Seventeen MPs from all political parties participate in the Committee's meetings that are held twice per week.

The task of the Committee for the Future is to create avenues for long-term future-oriented thinking in political decision-making. In the Finnish parliamentary system, committee meetings are held behind closed doors and MPs are free to express themselves. They share and explore ideas about the future and critically examine and anticipate the long-term impacts of current decisions.

The responsibilities of the Committee for the Future are: (1) preparing parliamentary documents; (2) making submissions on long-term future-related issues to other standing committees; (3) debating issues related to future developments and models; (4) undertaking analyses of futures studies in various fields that are relevant to decision-making; and (5) functioning as a parliamentary unit for assessing technological developments and their consequences to society.

The Committee for the Future conducts proactive and on-going dialogue with the Government on major future possibilities as well as problems and the means for solving them. The anticipation of future developments cannot be studied as part of standard parliamentary procedures and working modes. Specific futures studies methods, research targets and value discussions complement the legislative tasks of the Parliament and its field-specific legislative committees. The Committee for the Future reinforces the links between foresight and national democratic decision-making.

The Committee for the Future has an annual budget for its own research commissions, including the services of a permanent expert appointed by the Finland Futures Research Centre (FFRC), a department within Turku School of Economics at the University of Turku. This provides the Committee with access to the latest futures studies research topics and reports. Its administrative costs are covered by the Parliament's general budget.

Finding topics

One part of the tasks of the Committee for the Future is assigned by the Finnish Parliament. The Committee also prepares statements to other committees upon request. Future reports are submitted by the Government to the Parliament once during every four-year election period. The issues covered by these

reports reflect the main national long-term socioeconomic challenges of the respective period. The issues are decided by the Government.

The Committee for the Future is partly free to set its own agenda by providing research commissions and expressing interest in issues on the agenda of the Parliament and the other committees. Presumably, these issues should include long-term perspectives and multi-field futures-oriented deliberation. Often, the Committee for the Future decides to issue a statement on the annual budget and report of the Government. The Committee's status as a parliamentary think-tank is well-recognised, and the Committee demonstrates its status by providing statements and research commissions. Providing statements and including issues as research targets in the agenda mean starting lively discussions and interacting with thematic stakeholders in the Parliament, the Government and in wider civil society.

Work procedures and methods

The tasks with which the Committee for the Future is entrusted include the need for long-term future perspectives with futures research methods. This will continue to act as the foundation for high-quality futures work. At the beginning of each parliamentary term, new committee members are briefed on the specific tasks and working modes of the Committee for the Future.

Each committee has its own cabinet ministry as a counterpart for its interaction. For the Committee for the Future, the Prime Minister's Office is the most appropriate choice for the corresponding cabinet ministry. This is in accordance with its wide-ranging responsibilities that cover multi-field issues and a high level of Government-Parliament dialogue. Moreover, the Prime Minister also chairs the Research and Innovation Council of Finland, which further facilitates broader dialogue.

At least once during its term of office, the Government issues a report on long-term future prospects along with its objectives and targets. This includes a Foresight Group and a national foresight network, which act as the preparatory bodies of the Government. In turn, the Committee for the Future serves as the preparatory body of the Parliament and issues the futures report that acts as the Parliament's response to the Government. This response regularly includes critical notions and questions by MPs, to reflect the multiple voices within Finnish civil society. The working methods of the Committee for the Future include for example (open) expert hearings, dialogue in the Committee meetings, research commissions with stakeholder interaction, the refinement of knowledge as statements, and technological assessments as part of the European Parliamentary Technology Assessment (EPTA) network.

The Committee for the Future has a good vantage point from which to monitor world-wide developments. As an integral part of the parliamentary decision-making system, it plays a unique role in national anticipation and foresight. A considerable number of ministers have acted as members of the Committee. During the 2003–2007 period, the committee's chair, Jyrki Katainen, was elected as the leader of the largest opposition party, the National Coalition, and became the Minister of Finance after the election. The Committee's report "A Caring, Encouraging and Creative Finland", which appraised the information society, was almost completely integrated into the Government Programme. After the general election in spring 2011, Mr Katainen became Prime Minister. There have been many other ex-Future MPs in Government, including party leaders such as Jutta Urpilainen, the Minister of Finance and Chair of the Social Democratic Party, and Päivi Räsänen, the Minister of the Interior and Chair of the Christian Party.

Topics

The selection of the main topics of the research commissions is based on issues raised by MPs and expert hearings representing various sectors of society. For example, the Committee for the Future's agenda for 2016–2017 contains the following topics:

- radical technologies
- methods of the arts
- educational exports
- wellbeing 2030
- the sharing (platform) economy
- modes of expertise (i.e. counter-knowledge)
- generative (creative) spaces

The rationale for raising these issues lies within the Committee members' urgent interests in acquiring additional knowledge and further perspectives for decision-making purposes. Expert hearings and research issues also play a role in increasing the Committee's readiness to respond to the Government's report on the future.

Target groups

The Committee for the Future discusses the Parliamentary documents that are referred to it and, when requested to do so, makes submissions to other committees on future-related matters that are included within their spheres of responsibility and have a bearing on the development factors and models of the future. The Committee for the Future has connections to research institutes and units (such as universities and university units) and it provides research commissions that are associated with long-term future perspectives. It also functions as a parliamentary body that conducts technological foresight and debates the long-term influence of technology on society.

In this way, the Committee contributes to the work of the Government, the Parliament and civil society. The open Committee meetings are important from the perspectives of direct democracy (social media) and crowdsourcing. The Committee plays a key role in strengthening the formulation of the Parliament's futures-oriented policies. It reinforces the link between Finland's multi-voice civil society and Parliament during electoral terms.

Communication and publications

Most Committee meetings are held behind closed doors. The related agendas and minutes (with enclosures) are available on the Internet—if not immediately after the meeting, then after the current electoral term (in accordance with regulations). Most research results are published and are available on the Internet. In addition, some open Committee meetings are recorded and the videos are made available on the Internet.

Impact

The Committee for the Future prepares the drafts of the future reports that represent the Parliament's responses to the Government. The draft reports are discussed in the plenary session and are accepted as final versions by the Parliament. The future reports include legally binding statements as resolutions; these resolutions are then transformed into concrete actions and decisions by the Government. The Committee for the Future exercises formal preparatory authority over the contents of the future reports. It also exercises indirect preparatory power by providing statements to other committees.

However, the Committee for the Future plays a wider role in exploring future images and scenarios with value discussions. It exploits the visionary power of leading discussions about long-term futures. The Committee's working methods are based on creative and critical combinations of scientific and

technological knowledge creation and utilisation. This also includes the search for new and innovative political solutions. The Committee's reports are forward-looking and they arise from emerging (marginal and fresh) ideas, rather than attempting to please the wider public or voters.

The way ahead

The Committee for the Future is a permanent preparatory unit and think-tank within the Parliament (i.e. the parliamentary democratic system). The Committee is responsible for raising and debating issues that are related to multi-voiced civil societies with complicated environments and interconnections. Often, these issues lie within the intersection of administrative fields and contain the potential for long-term futures. In this way, the Committee provides a unique contribution to national foresight and decision-making. It has a permanent role and it shares the status of other permanent committees of Parliament. It exercises its visionary power and acts as the preparatory unit for the Parliament's future reports that include legally binding resolutions.

Since 2017, the Government's Agenda2030 action plan is also submitted to the Committee for the Future during each electoral term. The processing of the Agenda2030 report is a similar procedure to that of the Government Report on the Future.

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