

## Strengthening futures thinking in parliaments

### Reforçando a perspectiva sobre o futuro nos parlamentos

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## **STRENGTHENING FUTURES THINKING IN PARLIAMENTS**

### **REFORÇANDO A PERSPECTIVA SOBRE O FUTURO NOS PARLAMENTOS**

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There is a useful word to describe the problem plaguing decision-making all over the world: short-termism. People in companies and governments alike make decisions focusing on the short term, often at the cost of the longer term. This societal myopia has a terrible price for people and the environment.

Banks take disproportionate risks to appease shareholders. Politicians hesitate in tackling the climate crisis fearing bad poll results. Companies neglect investment in research and development to improve quarterly figures. Policy-makers refuse to secure the long-term sustainability of pension systems because they feel they cannot afford to alienate older voters.

Different institutional and other tools have been suggested to address short-termism. These include but are not limited to constitutional safeguards; revised accounting measures; ombudsmen or commissioners for the future; independent commissions or councils; and parliamentary committees.

Different approaches have all their pros and cons. Some are better suited for some circumstances, others may work well in others; there is no one-size-fits-all solution. The unique history and conditions of each country need to be taken into account.

In this article I focus on the Committee for the Future in the Finnish parliament. I outline the history and current activities of the Committee. More importantly, I try to analyse the strengths and weaknesses of the Committee, with the hope that the Finnish experiences would help other countries in finding the best tools to address short-termism.

#### **Background Of The Committee**

The roots of the Committee for the Future go back to the 1980's. In 1986, 133

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members of parliament presented a motion to create a futures research unit. This did not materialise, but a clear majority of MPs calling for a unit dedicated to futures research was an indication of the wide cross-party parliamentary support for futures thinking.

In 1992, MPs adopted a slightly different approach. This time they suggested that the Government should submit a report on long-term trends. One year later, a temporary Committee for the Future was set up. In 2000, the Committee was granted a permanent status.

The Committee has a number of tasks. Some are explicitly defined and others more implicit, formed by more than 20 years of operations.

First, a general task for the Committee is to advance futures policy dialogue. It is not enough for a single parliamentary committee to focus on futures; awareness of and attention to futures is required in the society at large. That is why it is essential for the Committee to reach out to stakeholders and citizens at events, through the media and, more recently, social media and the internet.

Secondly, the Committee is in charge of analysing and responding to government futures reports. Once every term, each government issues a report on selected future challenges. Topics vary from more general – such as sustainable growth in the most recent report – to more specific, including demographic change and climate policy. The report is prepared in the Prime Minister's Office, adopted by the government and submitted to the parliament. The Committee prepares the parliamentary response to the government report.

Thirdly, the Committee organises and coordinates technology assessment in the parliament. The Committee represents Finland in the European Parliamentary Technology Assessment network EPTA. Over the years the Committee has focused on emerging technologies, such as nanotechnology and biotechnology, and their potential benefits and risk for the society.

Fourthly, the Committee tries to follow research and development in futures studies and foresight. This covers both substance and methodology. The Committee has a permanent expert appointed to help with integrating futures studies to the activities.

Finally – and as a way to summarise different tasks – one could say that the Committee serves as a parliamentary think tank. It brings MPs from different parties together, to explore and debate pertinent futures issues. Thus it hopefully helps in raising the awareness on key long-term challenges.

What the Committee does not do, however, is have legislative duties. The Committee does not deal with government bills and only rarely does it comment on other government proposals submitted to the parliament.

### **From Black Swans To Radical Technologies**

Perhaps a more illustrative way of describing the role of the Committee is to look at its activities in practice. During the past period the work has been organised in a number of projects.

A project on sustainable growth has focused on finding new sources of economic growth while addressing urgent social and environmental challenges. It came up with ten concrete policy recommendations to the Government, ranging from promoting distributed renewable energy production with net metering to advancing crowdfunding.

The second project, called an inspired society, has studied the relationship between the social environment and growth businesses. It has tried to identify and present policy suggestions to support setting up businesses and spurring growth.

The third project, new learning, has analysed case studies of best practices in education. The idea has been to study how the practices are implemented today and to make proposals on scaling them up.

Welfare societies are facing several challenges from aging populations to economic crises undermining public finances. The fourth project has posed the question what a welfare society would look if it were built from scratch today.

These four projects span four key societal challenges: sustainability, entrepreneurship, education and welfare society. On top of them the Committee has had four initiatives with a slightly different scope.

Black swans are rare, improbable and unanticipated events that have drastic effects – either negative or positive. To increase awareness on black swans the Committee ran a short story writing competition. The best stories were published in a book and on the internet in multiple languages, including English.

Radical innovations or technologies trigger a change that is disruptive rather than incremental. But what will these radical changes be? The Committee developed an analysis tool to identify emerging technologies. A collection of 100 key radical technologies was published in a report.

New internet tools have made involving people significantly easier. Crowdsourcing can be used for various purposes: discussion, innovation, analysis, design, data mining, funding and so on. The committee looked at international experiences of using crowdsourcing for democratic processes. We ran a pilot project on crowdsourcing a draft government off-road traffic bill in collaboration with the Ministry of the Environment.

Last but not least, the Committee has had a longstanding interest in Russia. Earlier committees have focussed on for example the economy and democracy in Russia. This time we analysed how neighbouring countries see Russia.

### **How The Committee Has Succeeded**

It can be argued that the Committee has been successful in various ways. I will highlight six potential successes.

Firstly, the futures orientation is quite strong, at least relatively speaking. The Committee has been able to identify important futures challenges and focus on them in its various activities.

Secondly, the Committee has been quite successful in rising above daily politics. Members on the committee represent no fewer than eight different parties both from opposition and government alike. Still this has not stopped from having frank discussions – and coming to unanimous conclusions.

Thirdly, the Committee enjoys a high degree of autonomy. It is free to set its own agenda, regardless of the government. Used wisely, this autonomy can be a potent tool.

Fourthly, the Committee is conveniently located in the interface of research and policy. It can act as an intermediary between research and policy-making communities. The Committee has access to the highest levels of decision-making.

Fifthly, the Committee has served as a kind of a living laboratory. The parliament can be a conservative and slow-moving institution at times. Therefore it is all the more useful that one committee can experiment with new ideas and tools – with the hope that they can be later adopted by the rest of the parliament.

Finally, the Committee has educated a whole generation of policy-makers in futures thinking. The previous Prime Minister of Finland used to chair the Committee. The most likely next Prime Minister has also been a member. Thanks to this experience, they are trained in futures thinking.

### **Challenges**

While the Committee has been successful in many ways, at the same time we need to be frank about various challenges. Based on my experience I will now focus on six of them.

The biggest challenge revolves around impact and effectiveness. Is the Committee really having an impact on the surrounding society? Are activities effective? Is the Committee using resources efficiently?

Which brings us to the second challenge: scant resources. The Committee has a staff of three and a moderate budget which allows for the activities described earlier. However, the budget sets tight limits on what kind of research can be commissioned, which reports can be translated and whether members can attend key international conferences.

The third challenge is the sometimes limited peer support. Some MPs consider the Committee as second tier, low in the internal hierarchy of committees. There have even been calls to dismantle the Committee altogether.

A related challenge is limited public recognition. Many, if not most, Finnish citizens are not aware of the existence of the Committee, let alone its activities. Often it seems that the Committee is better known abroad than it is in Finland.

One can also ask what the added value of all activities is. Finland is lucky to have numerous institutions working on foresight and futures issues. Is the Committee really providing unique input or more duplicating efforts?

Similarly, it is fair to ask how long term really is long term. For many politicians even four years can seem long. Yet it is the challenges awaiting us in 10, 20, 50 or even 100 years that require greater attention. Is the Committee for the Future really worthy of its grand name?

Finally, the intention for the Committee was never to scrutinise legislation. But if a committee dedicated to futures issues does not review bills from the point of view of long-term future, who can and should do it?

### **Discussion And Recommendations**

The Committee, during its more than 20 years of activities, has achieved a lot. The mere fact that it is still actively working while many related institutions in other countries – e.g. the Hungarian ombudsman or the Israeli commissioner – have either been discontinued or stripped of their capacity is a testament to playing an important role.

However, a number of questions can be raised. Is the Committee really having an impact on the society as a whole? Are the members able to focus on what can be genuinely called long-term futures? Is the Committee providing added value in an effective and efficient manner?

The Finnish Committee for the Future provides one interesting and in many ways successful model of strengthening futures thinking in parliaments. If the Committee is able to address legitimate concerns and rise up to challenges, some of which I have described earlier, it can serve this role even better in the future.

There are various ways to strengthen futures thinking in decision-making. A parliamentary committee, an ombudsman or a commissioner and constitutional changes are among some of the tools different countries have experimented with and used with varying results.

Tackling short-termism and addressing long-term challenges in decision-making is essential. It would be wise for all parliaments to adopt one or more of the ex-

isting tools – or devise completely new ones.

The Finnish Committee for the Future is a rare, and in many ways unique, institution. I hope our experiences – both successes and challenges – will help others in finding effective tools appropriate in their circumstances.

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