

IN ENGLISH

# DEMOCRACY'S LONG ROAD

FINLAND'S REPRESENTATIVE DEMOCRACY AND CIVIL SOCIETY  
FROM 1863 TO THE PRESENT DAY



Around the world people are increasingly engaged in lively discussion about the way democracy works and what its future may be. Finland is no exception, and for this reason it is essential to know what are the historical roots of our democracy and how it has evolved into its present form.

In autumn 2013 it will be 150 years since the Diet of the Grand Duchy of Finland began to meet regularly and to draft laws with far-reaching consequences. Since 1863 our country has been built with the help of representative democracy into the constitutional state and welfare society in which we live. Without an effective and vigilant civil society this would hardly have succeeded so well.

*Czar Alexander II opening the 1863 Diet at the imperial palace in Helsinki, which today serves as the presidential palace. The painting, which belongs to the House of Nobility was painted by R.W. Ekman in 1863.*



Czar Alexander I opened the 1809 Diet in Porvoo. Painting by R.W. Ekman from 1858.

The foundation of Finland's political system and social order was created during the more than 600 years when Finland belonged to the Kingdom of Sweden. It was also during this period that a representative decision-making system was created, from which many centuries later parliamentary democracy based on universal suffrage was developed in Finland.

The king's power was great, but most often he had to obtain support from his subjects for important tax decisions. From the 1460s onward this took place by convening the Diet of Estates, in which the nobility, the clergy, burghers and (land-owning) peasants were represented. These made up only a small portion of the population, however. Finnish peasants were not represented in the Diet until 1563.

The representation of the peasantry in a national legislative body was unique internationally. This was still the case in 1809, when Finland was conquered and became part of the Russian Empire with the status of an autonomous Grand Duchy, which was allowed to keep its own Lutheran religion, Swedish laws and legal system. In practice Finland retained its old social structure and in addition received its own central administration.

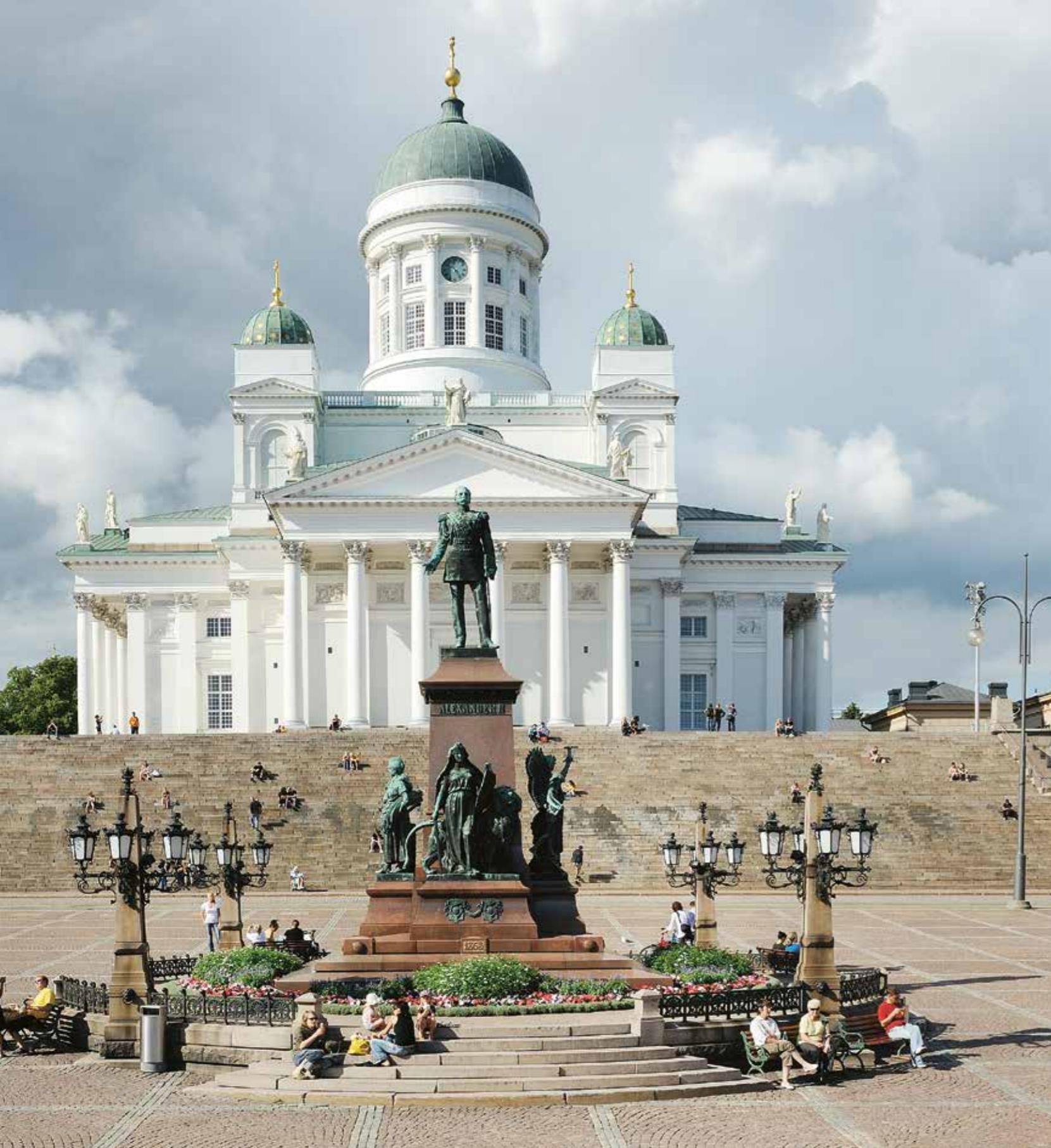
#### Polish uprising speeded emperor's reforms

In the spring of 1809 the representatives of Finland's Estates convened in the Diet of Porvoo, under the direction of the tsar. After that it took 54 years before the next Diet was held. In the meantime reforms were carried out mainly by imperial decree. In the 1860s

Finnish society was in need of major reforms, which required new laws and thus a Diet. This development was spurred by a reform programme that was prepared by Tsar Alexander II in 1856 with the goal of developing industry, schools, transport connections and civil servants' pay in Finland.

Pressure for reform also came from elsewhere. Russia had just lost the Crimean War against a western alliance and was vigorously striving to build up its military forces and social structures. In the winter of 1863 an uprising broke out in Poland, which was then part of the Russian empire. The tsar agreed to convene the Finnish Diet so that the burgeoning spirit of reform would not turn into open discontent as in Poland. Around this same time the Finnish press was assuming the role of a vigilant social commentator, absorbing influences from the other Nordic countries and continental Europe.





*The statue of czar Alexander II on the Senate Square in Helsinki is also a monument to the 1863 Diet.*

#### **Birth of the first political parties and the Finnish movement**

On 18 September 1863 Alexander II welcomed the representatives of Finland's four Estates at opening ceremonies of the Diet in the Imperial Palace in Helsinki, which became the Presidential Palace after Finland gained independence. He emphasized his intention to hold on to the constitutional powers that were his under Finland's existing fundamental laws. At the same time he announced that he would expand the Finnish Estates' right to decide on taxation and to present new legislative proposals to the tsar. In practice this meant a promise to convene the Diet regularly.

A new Diet Act, which called for the Diet to meet regularly, was ratified in 1869. The Diet was to be convened at least every fifth year. Beginning in 1882 it met every third year in practice. The division into Estates, which dated back to the Middle Ages, remained in place up to 1906, however. This means that the entire Diet never met in one place. Each Estate voted separately, and if three of the four Estates supported a legislative proposal it was presented to the tsar, who approved it if he wished. Less than one-tenth of the adult population had the right to vote, which was increasingly viewed as an anomaly, since the old society of the Estates was rapidly giving way to an open civil society.

With legislative work becoming more active, political groups gradually developed across Estate lines. They established their own papers and their supporters took part in rapidly expanding voluntary work

around the country. The Municipal Acts of 1865 and 1873, which significantly increased citizens' possibilities to influence local decision-making, also supported this development.

Lively Diet and civil activity was spurred not only by the desire to reform Finnish society according to Western European models, but also by growing faith in the idea that Finland formed a separate nation inside the Russian Empire, with its own culture and language. Sweden had remained the official language during the period of autonomy, but thanks to the Finnish movement's energetic demands Finnish gradually became the leading language in both administration and culture.

By the 1890s interaction between civil society and the Diet's legislative work had taken on such established forms that this led to more open debate concerning social alternatives. At the same time Russia's efforts to tie the Grand Duchy closer to the Empire met stiff resistance in Finland. In spite of many disagreements, the Diet of the Estates approved some four hundred laws in 1863-1906, all of which strengthened faith in the common good, Finnish society.

Leap from the Middle Ages to the head of the class in Europe

With Russia on the brink of revolution in autumn 1905, after another lost war, Finland suddenly found the way open to create a unicameral Parliament based on universal suffrage. All the Estates backed the proposal, and since the tsar was also ready to approve it,

the reform entered into force in the summer of 1906. The following year Finland held its first fully democratic parliamentary elections. Every Finnish citizen over the age of 24, including women as well as men, had the right to vote and stand for office.

This leap from a medieval Estates system to the most modern form of democracy in Europe was remarkable in many ways. The number of eligible voters increased tenfold (from 126,000 to 1.3 million), and Finnish women became the first in Europe to receive the right to vote and the right to stand for election. It was not until the next decade that women received the same rights in the other Nordic countries: Norway in 1913, Denmark in 1918 and Sweden in 1919.

Another internationally significant political milestone came when the recently organized political labour movement, in the form of the Social Democratic Party, became the largest party in Parliament. As a result of the reform other political parties were also established, including many that are still represented in the Finnish Parliament in one form or another.

Parliamentary work, which started off with high hopes and great promises, quickly ran into many problems, however. The rise of the multi-party system, the expanded right of expression and frequent parliamentary elections drew attention to increasingly sharp divisions. The people had received the right to vote, but political disputes both in domestic policy and in relation to the Russian rulers prevented Parliament from enacting laws that could have resolved the most pressing social problems. Civil society organizations also became more clearly divided along ideological lines by the 1910s.



*School teacher Maria Vuorio voting in the first election in which women were allowed to vote in May 1907. Finnish women were the first in the world to receive full political rights, i.e. the right to vote and the right to stand as candidate in elections.*

*In early elections your vote was cast by drawing a red line by your candidate of choice on the ballot.*



Foto: Signe Brander  
Helsingfors, 1907

PREVIOUS SPREAD:

*The first members of the one-chamber Diet leaving a church service in conjunction with the opening of the Diet in 1907.*

*The Constitutional Committee met in the House of Estates in early 1918 to consider what form of government the newly independent Finland would have. The committee was chaired by Kaarlo Juho Ståhlberg, who was to serve as the first president of the republic between 1919–1925.*

Democracy survived extremists and war

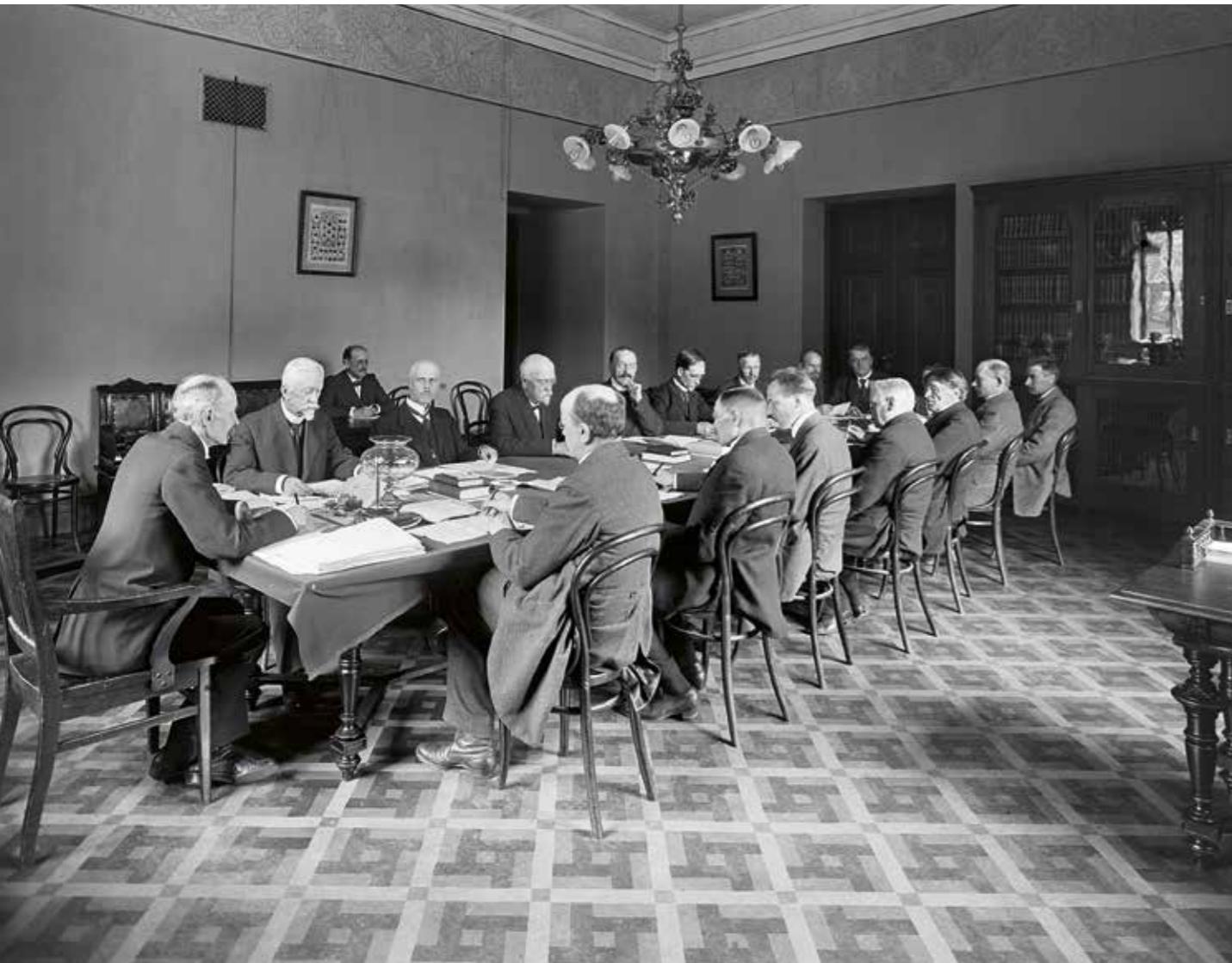
Finland, which had become something of a state within a state during the First World War and the Russian Revolution, finally severed its ties with the Russian Empire in late 1917. When the Finnish Parliament approved a declaration of independence on 6 December 1917, the country's domestic and foreign policy situation was extremely confused and menacing, however. Within less than two months this led to a civil war in which both sides were so strongly allied with foreign countries that the dispute was in practice a continuation of the First World War. Germany's

intervention led to the victory of the Whites and plans to establish a monarchy in Finland. When Germany lost the war in autumn 1918, however, a new path to a republican form of government opened up.

This path did not open up merely because of the power vacuum in the Baltic Sea region following the defeat of both Russia and Germany. Of equal importance was the ability of Finland's civil society and Parliament to quickly restore faith in representative democracy. The Parliament that was elected in spring 1919 started by enacting a new Constitution based on a republican form of government: *"Sovereign power in Finland is vested in the people, who are represented*

*by Parliament."* Foreign policy was to be directed by the President of the Republic, who also had the right to appoint the Government and to dissolve Parliament. As a counterweight the Government had to enjoy Parliament's support, which means that MPs had the right to present interpellations and move for a vote of no confidence in the Government. If a majority of Parliament voted against the Government, it had to resign.

The parliamentary system of government or representative democracy has been maintained in Finland since 1919. During the first decades the parliamentary system often resulted in short-term Govern-



*From 1911 to 1931 Parliament met in the Heimola building. Important decisions that were made in this building included Finland's declaration of independence in 1917.*





Parliament House was inaugurated in March 1931. The building, which is still today the foremost symbol for Finland's independence and democracy, was designed by architect Johan Sigfrid Sirén.

ments. In resolving social conflicts left over from the early days of independence it was necessary to respect the rules of parliamentary democracy, which included accepting political compromises. Respect for legally made decisions was also required from the rest of society, and in the late 1930s representative democracy clearly proved its durability in the face of threats posed by illegal extremist movements. Finnish democracy withstood the pressures that led to the rise of right-wing dictatorships in the rest of Eastern Europe as a result of fear of Communism.

Although Finland was dragged into the Second World War along with these other countries, Finnish democracy and civil society managed to survive this purgatory with the help of a citizens' army. Normal parliamentary elections were arranged as early as spring 1945, when war was still raging elsewhere in Europe.

#### Building the welfare society

In Finland's post-war reconstruction and the rapid social change that followed, effective representative democracy and civil society were needed. Reconstruction was aided by fast economic growth and stable relations with the Soviet Union assisted.

Changes required long-term solutions from legislators and citizens' broad trust in the country's political system, however. The most difficult periods came in 1945–48 and in the late 1950s, when many civic circles were dissatisfied with Parliament's ability and willingness to carry out reforms, which led to extra-parliamentary mass movements and repeated strikes. In March 1956 dissatisfaction resulted in a general strike that lasted many weeks. Defusing the situation required a new broad-based Government and significant pay increases.



In the 1945 election 21-year-olds were allowed to vote, which enabled young war veterans to vote. Also, advance voting from abroad was allowed as many Lapland residents had been temporarily evacuated to Sweden.





*The 1956 general strike started the same day President Urho Kaleva Kekkonen was inaugurated.*



*A significant symbol for the equal Nordic welfare state is a strong elementary education. This picture is from the 1970's.*

The biggest question in legislative work up to the 1980s was the creation and financing of a Nordic welfare state. At times there were considerable differences between parties concerning how quickly the nation should proceed in creating a broad social insurance system, extensive social and health care and a comprehensive school system.

By the 1960s Finland had industrialized and urbanized more rapidly than any other country in Europe, and this was reflected in many ways in the organization field and citizens' social activities. The most significant new actor was the politically oriented student movement, which gave rise to a vocal left wing in the early 1970s, as in many other capitalist countries.

The party field also changed. In the late 1950s a faction split off from the Social Democratic Party. In the late 1960s the Finnish People's Democratic League was wracked by internal discord. Around the same time the Rural Party split off from the Centre Party (formerly the Agrarian League), and in the early 1970s it held nearly 10 per cent of seats in Parliament. In 1995 the Rural Party renamed itself and is now known as the Finns Party.

Similar changes took place in smaller parties as well. The right wing of the Swedish People's Party split off and formed the Constitutional Conservative Party to protest the SPR's decision to go along with other parties in supporting the extension of President Urho Kekkonen's term of office in 1974 without elections, on the basis of emergency legislation. In the 1983 elections the Liberal Party lost its last seat in Parliament while the Greens won their first seat. Another newcomer was the Christian League, which has been represented in Parliament since 1970. In 2001 the party was renamed the Christian Democrats. The biggest ideological change in the party field took place in spring 1990, when the Finnish People's Democratic League and the Finnish Communist Party merged to form the Left Alliance.



*From 1966 onwards political differences were smoothed out by broad-based Governments, whose core up to the mid-1980s was formed by the Social Democrats and the Centre Party. Pictured here is Prime Minister Kalevi Sorsa and his new government visiting president Urho Kekkonen at Tamminiemi on September 4th, 1972.*

From 1966 onwards political differences were smoothed out by broad-based Governments, whose core up to the mid-1980s was formed by the Social Democrats and the Centre Party. Such broad Government coalitions crossing the line between left and right have not been seen elsewhere in the capitalist world. After the 1987 parliamentary elections the line between right and left was crossed even more visibly, when the Social Democrats and the National Coalition Party formed a “blue-red” Government. Coalition Governments crossing the right-left axis have been common in the past decades: since the blue-red Government Finland has had only two Governments that have excluded the left, in 1991–1995 and 2007–2011.



#### **Parliament's tasks increased and changed by EU membership**

By the 1990s all of Europe was experiencing enormous changes, which were reflected in Finland's economic, political and social development with a short delay. Following the collapse of the Soviet Union, Finnish industry, which had depended heavily on eastern exports, ran into serious problems. Together with careless borrowing this led to a deep recession and high unemployment in 1991–1994. The crisis was worsened by uncertainty concerning Russia's future. This accelerated the Government's and Parliament's decision to apply for membership of the European Union, which was in the process of intensifying cooperation in the political, economic and security fields.

A consultative referendum on the question of EU membership was held in Finland on 16 October 1994. The last time a consultative referendum had been held was in the early 1930s, when Finns voted by a large majority to end Prohibition. The EU referendum was closer, but since nearly 57 per cent of voters supported the negotiated accession treaty, Parliament approved it in November 1994 by a clear majority. Opponents of membership had insisted that the treaty should be treated in the same way as an amendment to the Constitution, which requires five-sixths of votes for approval. The majority of Parliament did not see any reason for this, however, and Finland joined the European Union at the beginning of 1995 along with Sweden and Austria.

EU membership changed Parliament's legislative work and civil society's activities. Every piece of leg-



Aslak Näkkäläjärvi voted in the referendum on EU-membership in Inari, Lapland.



Many demonstrations are arranged in front of Parliament House. On March 20th 2013 thousands of students marched to Parliament House in a demonstration for tax-funded financial aid to students.

isolation concerning the Union as a whole that is enacted by the European Parliament must be submitted to Parliament for approval. Furthermore, the Prime Minister has to explain Finland's position in the Grand Committee before every EU summit or meeting of the Council of Ministers and report to the Grand Committee on results after the meeting. The other committees participate in preparing and overseeing EU matters by submitting statements to the Grand Committee in their own sectors. The consideration of EU matters has significantly increased Parliament's work load.

Finns have a more direct possibility to influence the Union's legislative work by voting every fifth year in the European Parliament elections. Since the enlargement of the Union, the number of Finnish Members of the European Parliament has fallen

from 16 to 13, which is only a small fraction of the total number of seats (754). The voter turnout in European Parliament elections declined in the late 1990s to less than 50 per cent, as in other parts of Europe. The low turnout has weakened the European Parliament's credibility as a democratic institution and stimulated discussion concerning representative democracy in general.

Another socially significant reform was the new Constitution that entered into force in 2000, which shifted all the President's key powers in the area of domestic policy to Parliament and the Government, which must enjoy its confidence. From 1919 to 2000 the President appointed a person to form the Government and could dissolve Parliament if he wished and call for new elections. Nowadays the parliamentary groups conduct Government negotiations indepen-

dently and in the end select the Prime Minister, who is the only person with the power to propose that Parliament be dissolved.

#### Democracy is more than elections

Declining voter turnouts are also a problem in Finland's parliamentary and municipal elections. There is no quick solution, however. The electronic media and increasingly popular social media have opened new channels to influence decision-makers and citizens directly. Plenary sessions of Parliament are televised regularly, MPs are active on the internet and people exchange opinions about society - sometimes quite bluntly—in discussion forums. At the same time entertainment competes for citizens' time and atten-

tion and is easier to digest than complicated social issues.

By international standards Finland's representative democracy and civil society, which is closely linked to it, work extremely well together. It is true that in most countries elections are held regularly nowadays. This does not guarantee that citizens have the freedom to express their opinions publicly or the possibility to influence decision-making. In addition to freedom of speech and an independent court system, one of the cornerstones of democracy is the right to establish political parties and civic organizations that can operate freely without having to fear arbitrary behaviour from the powers that be.

Representative democracy has been built in Finland in many historical stages. It should be protected in all circumstances in the future as well.

*Plenary sessions are the foremost fora for political debate in Finland. In recent years parliament has been gathered to plenary sessions up to 500 hours a year, and on average 150 sessions a year.*

**Text**

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**Photos**

COVER, PAGE 2, BACK COVER

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PAGE 4

R.W. Ekman / Finnish Government

PAGE 5

Parliament

PAGE 6

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PAGE 7

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PAGE 9

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PAGES 10–11

Signe Brander / Helsinki City Museum / Parliament

PAGE 12

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PAGE 13

Parliament

PAGE 14

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PAGE 15

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PAGE 16

Lehtikuva / Parliament

PAGE 16

Lehtikuva / Esko Sala / Parliament

PAGE 18

Lehtikuva / Jarmo Hietaranta / Parliament

PAGE 19

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PAGE 20

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PAGE 21

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PAGE 23

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OF FINLAND

5/2013

