

The Model for Parliaments in the Future? The Case of the Finnish Committee for the Future¹

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ABSTRACT

This article was submitted to *Politiikka* mainly because there appears to be a regrettable paucity of recent empirical work on the *Eduskunta*. As Nousiainen, Anckar and others have contended, constitutional reform has promoted parliamentarism in Finland and yet research into the changing role of parliament appears conspicuous by its absence. The article, which is based principally on a postal questionnaire and personal interviews with its seventeen regular members, profiles a distinctive component of the *Eduskunta* – the Committee for the Future. Although it is not a routine part of the legislative process, it is argued that it may be characterised as an *agenda-setting standing committee* in that it canvasses, and contributes to setting a wider policy agenda that reflects the future challenges facing Finnish society.

“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 in the future. Democracy cannot be realised simply by accepting changes that have already taken place.” (TuVM 1/1998 vp – VNS 3/1997 vp, p. 82.)

The Finnish *Eduskunta* is the only parliament in the world to have a special (and now) permanent standing committee dealing with the future. Initially set up in 1993, the 17-member Committee for the Future (*Tulevaisuusvaliokunta*) is one of the *Eduskunta*’s fifteen stand-

ing committees. However, it does not deliberate on legislative proposals, nor does it review the government’s annual finance bill (budget). Furthermore, it does not perform a British ‘select committee function’ in the sense of monitoring the activities of a particular government department. It is in fact the only non-sectoral standing committee in the *Eduskunta*. The foremost aim of the Committee for the Future (TVK) is to bring a long-term perspective to the parliamentary decision-making process. This is necessary because “in parliaments, the deliberation of the future has been overshadowed by the routine, often highly detailed and increasing body of legislative work, despite the fact that in the economic and technological fields, as well as in other areas of society, deep-seated changes are already visible”.² This article

¹ This paper was originally presented at the Fourth Workshop of Parliamentary Scholars and Parliamentarians held at Wroxton College, Oxfordshire in August 2000. Some of its basic contextual material was included to assist those [mainly Africa and Caribbean] legislators unfamiliar with the Finnish political scene.

² TuVM 1/1998 vp – VNS/3, 1997 vp.

will profile the work of the TVK from its inception as an ad hoc committee to the achievement of regularised status in 1999 and its creation as a permanent standing committee in April 2000.

The empirical work is based primarily on a postal questionnaire of the TVK's seventeen regular members which was circulated in January 2000, just after the achievement of permanent status, and elicited a 70.6% response rate. Personal interviews were also conducted with ten present or past members of the TVK. Other in-depth interviews included the TVK secretary, MPs from outside the committee and staff in the Cabinet Office responsible for future issues. Documentary sources ranged from government and TVK reports and minutes of parliamentary debates to monographs and miscellaneous committee material.

The article is organised into five sections. The first, which examines the origins and development of the TVK, represents a very brief (select) history of the committee. The second focuses on the status of the TVK and examines *inter alia* the way it is viewed by members and outsiders, the value members attach to its work, and how committed they are to TVK business. The third section concentrates on the TVK's role in the standing committee system. It highlights its distinctive features, examines how integrated it is into the standing committee system and considers how it might be classified. The fourth part enumerates the methods used by the TVK in pressing its agenda of 'future issues' and assesses how effective the committee has been in generating a long-term perspective in parliamentary decision-making. Finally, the paper asks whether the TVK is a model for other parliaments in the future. It is suggested that the existence of a specific committee for the future has served at very least to highlight issues of widespread importance regarding the role of legislatures in the transition to the information society, the changing nature of representative democracy and, above all, the competence of parliamentarians to make informed judgements on crucial policy matters.

The Origins and Development of the Committee for the Future

The private member's initiative that led indirectly to the creation of the TVK as an ad hoc standing committee in 1993 was tabled when Finland was in the depths of its worst-ever recession. This was the time when a senior policy adviser, Raimo Sailas, was urging in a celebrated paper the need for a long-term programme of austerity to reduce the level of public debt. The initiative, moreover, came only three months after the Esko Aho-led four-party, non-socialist coalition – the first for a quarter of a century – had applied for EU membership. Against this momentous backdrop, it is not perhaps surprising that there was no coverage of the sequence leading to the foundation of the TVK in Finland's only newspaper with nation-wide coverage, *Helsingin Sanomat*. In any event, the creation of the committee owed much to the efforts of two men – the Conservative MP, Martti Tiuri, and, in particular, the Green MP, Eero Paloheimo. Both had written books on future issues going back to the 1960s and, before entering politics, both were academics at the University of Technology in Helsinki. Tiuri held a chair in radio technology between 1962–83; Paloheimo returned there after he stood down from parliament in 1995.

Tiuri has related how the need for a parliamentary mechanism for the discussion of future issues had been discussed in a joint forum of MPs and scientists, known by the acronym *Tutkas* (*Tutkijoiden ja kansanedustajien seura*) as early as the 1980s (Tiuri was its chair between 1983–84).³ However, Paloheimo's election to the Eduskunta in 1987 proved the real turning point. When asked by the media why he entered parliament, Paloheimo countered that politics was too short-sighted and that he wanted to do something about it. Accordingly, he spent five years in private lobbying, personally canvassing all but a handful of fellow MPs.⁴ Progress

³ Tutkas has an annual membership fee and boasts about half the two hundred MPs among its membership. The active participation of parliamentarians in its meetings, however, is no more than between five and twenty. (Interview with Martti Tiuri 18.5.2000.)

⁴ Paloheimo has recalled how after the 1991 Independence Day occasion in the Presidential Castle he,

was far from smooth. Indeed, Paloheimo has described how when Tutkas wanted to organise a discussion on relevant future issues in the plenary chamber – and to make it an annual event – the Speaker, Ilkka Suominen, emphatically ruled it out. Yet by 1992 Paloheimo had collected 167 signatures for a private member's bill – an all-time record and in excess of the five-sixths support needed to amend the constitution in the lifetime of a single parliament. On June 12 1992 the Eduskunta sent the Paloheimo bill to its Constitutional Committee. Paloheimo proposed amending article 36a of the [1919] constitution so that each incoming government would be required to put the details of its plans for the long-term future before parliament along with its legislative programme.⁵ These would be contained in the form of a 'report to parliament' (*selonteko*) which, unlike the government programme, presented as a communiqué (*tiedonanto*) could not lead to a vote of confidence. In this way, both short- and long-term issues would be considered side by side.

In its report on September 22 1992, the Constitutional Committee rejected the Paloheimo initiative. It accepted that there was a need for parliamentary discussion of the challenges and opportunities facing society in the longer term. But it did not concur that it was necessary to amend the constitution to achieve this objective. Amending article 36a, it held, would *oblige* governments to report to parliament on the future. However, it submitted that 1) it was possible [presumably in the event of cabinet instability] that there could be several government reports on the future during the Eduskunta's four-year electoral term and that could hardly be the intention, 2) reports produced after the formation of a new government could

the Left Alliance leader, Claes Andersson, and their respective wives, adjourned to the restaurant *Kalastajatorppa*. Spotting there an American film star from the detective series 'Wise Guy', the two men joked that their wives should go and get his autograph. Whilst they were away, Paloheimo asked Andersson in earnest if he was willing to help him promote the parliamentary discussion of future issues. (Interview with Eero Paloheimo 18.5.2000.)

⁵ *Lakialoite* 22, 1992 vp Paloheimo ym: *Ehdotus laiksi Suomen hallitusmuodon § 36a:n muuttamista*.

well prove problematical since a high-quality document would be unlikely shortly after the completion of [often long and hard] negotiations between the coalition partners and 3) that from a constitutional standpoint it would be exceptional to require a government to report on its plans for the future beyond its existing term of office. The Constitutional Committee did, however, insist that the government should produce a report on the future during the existing Eduskunta (1991–95) based on, and incorporating the views of experts.

A dissenting statement to the Constitutional Committee's report was appended by two committee members, Paavo Nikula (Greens) and Ensio Laine (Left Alliance) recommending simply that the Paloheimo initiative be accepted. Ultimately, Tiuri, backed by Paloheimo, came up with a compromise proposal (*perustelulausemaehdotus*) that did not involve amending the constitution, but went further than the Constitutional Committee's report. It required the government to consider creating binding regulations for bringing further future reports to parliament at least once every electoral term. The matter went to a vote on October 13 1992 when 96 MPs voted for the Tiuri amendment and 54 for the Constitutional Committee's report. In short, an *amended* version of the Constitutional Committee's report was ultimately accepted.

When the Eduskunta came to deliberate on the Aho government's report *Charting Finland's Future Options*, prepared in the Prime Minister's Office and submitted to parliament in autumn 1993⁶, it required that a separate body be established to consider and respond to the report. Accordingly, on October 28 1993, the Eduskunta referred it to a special standing committee and, in this way, the TVK was created on an ad hoc basis. In preparing its response – its first report was completed on December 16 1994 – the TVK did two main things. First, it undertook a series of expert hearings on those European and global factors likely to affect Finland's future. Second, it created a five-person 'scenario working group'

⁶ *Suomen tulevaisuus ja toimintavaihtoehdot – valtioneuvoston selonteko eduskunnalle* (Valtioneuvoston kanslian julkaisusarja 1993/1: Helsinki 1993).

from among its membership which met daily in parliament during the Easter week (28–31 March) 1994 and produced three contrasting scenarios.⁷ Martti Tiuri has recounted how much of this first TVK term was a learning exercise – learning how future research was done – and he recalled in particular an ‘away-day’ meeting in Tuusula at Eero Paloheimo’s house at which the implications of the three different scenarios outlined above were studied.⁸

The TVK’s report on *Charting Finland’s Future Options* was critical on a number of counts. It was said to be unduly weighted towards the economy and that many international problems of ‘soft security’ with likely repercussions for Finland had been ignored. There was very little about the substance of Finland’s national education strategy and no alternative to a strong economic growth model was presented. Yet the report could not conceal divisions within the committee itself. For example, it steered clear of taking a definite stand on the issue of future nuclear power plant construction in Finland, although two of no less than six dissenting statements referred to this very issue. Partisan allegiance was prominent in what amounted to a policy statement from five opposition-based Social Democrats on the TVK, whilst the younger committee members brought out the thorny issue of inter-generational inequality. The most sweeping indictment of the TVK’s first report emanated from [the solitary Liberal in the Eduskunta] Tuulikki Ukkola, who insinuated that the whole approach had been prejudiced and unambitious. She argued that it would have been much more fruitful to have based the committee’s work on the report of the scenario working group and concluded that a committee report of this kind should not aim to generate a bland consensus. (TVK Report 1994, p. 65.)

⁷ A positive scenario – the so-called ‘control scenario’ – which assumed global, or at least sufficient regional control of the world. A ‘threat scenario’ which involved the escalation of global problems to explosion point. An ‘intermediate scenario’ which assumed only partial control of developments. (*Report No 1/1994 of the Special Parliamentary Committee on Finland’s Future Options*, TVK Report 1994, pp. 61–62.)

⁸ Interview with Martti Tiuri 18.5.2000.

In fact there were almost two-hundred votes on the TVK’s first report. True, 90% of issues were decided without one whilst only 9% required a formal division. But one question was resolved by the toss of a coin in the chairman’s favour. It related to the section in the report that read “Finland’s development co-operation must be clearly aimed at supporting population programmes. Family planning, human rights and environmental protection must be defined as requirements for receiving aid”. (Ibid., 15.) This was not to the liking of *inter alia* Astola and Wahlström who, in their dissenting statement, argued in favour of omitting any reference to family planning (birth control). Nor did the procedure appeal to Ukkola who asked incredulously: “Does this mean that the future will comply with the toss of a coin in a committee?” (Ibid., 65.)

Not unconnected to the preparation of its first report, the TVK on October 24 1994 organised a televised discussion on Finland’s future options in the Eduskunta auditorium in which ordinary citizens could and did take part. The aim was to show that the TVK and Eduskunta were open to the opinions of the man/woman in the street and, indeed, fresh ideas. In reality, however, opposition to the TVK existed among MPs from the outset, not least because it was not in line with the traditional function of parliament of passing laws and approving the budget. They were wary of the new dimension the TVK brought to parliamentary activity. Initially, there was also (and to some extent remains) opposition from those Social Democratic MPs close to trade union circles since they knew welfare issues would be discussed and wanted to preserve their strategic negotiating and consultative position. In any event, on January 27 1995 the TVK report on the government’s *Charting Finland’s Future Options* was passed virtually unanimously by the Eduskunta.

The TVK was not reconstituted at the beginning of the 1995 Eduskunta session. A commitment to produce a report on the future, and by inference the need for a new TVK, was incorporated into the Lipponen 1 ‘rainbow coalition’ programme in 1995. But reluctance in civil service circles held things up. Ultimately, the support of the Eduskunta Speaker, Riitta Uo-

sukainen, was important and the TVK was re-elected, albeit again on an ad hoc basis, in February 1996 (Tiuri 1999, 191). By then, Eero Paloheimo had retired from parliament and had been succeeded as TVK chair by Martti Tiuri, who gained his party's nomination for the post in a ballot against Sirpa Pietikäinen, the minister of the environment in the Aho cabinet. Tiuri has described how, on being elected, the press queried why such a forward-looking post should go to the oldest member of parliament. He added, "I defended myself by saying that nobody else had seventy years experience of the future"! (Tiuri 1999, 192.) Tiuri's chairmanship style, however, proved too technical (scientific in its orientation) for some TVK members and at least one frustrated Social Democratic committee member decided against seeking renewed membership after the 1999 general election.

The second TVK (1996–99) produced responses to a two-part future report from the government. The first, *Finland and the Future of Europe* (VNS/3, 1996 vp) was submitted to the Eduskunta in October 1996 and the second, *Skill and Fair Play – An Active and Responsible Finland* in April 1997. (TuVM 1/1998 vp –VNS/3, 1997 vp, p. 92.) The TVK's first response was unanimous and its report, completed on March 18 1997, was adopted by the Eduskunta without a vote. The TVK's second report, which it received on April 29 1997 (and completed on October 13 1998), attempted to foster a dialogue with the political executive by answering some of the questions raised in the government's report.

Unlike the first TVK which spent most of the period 1993–95 working on a response to the Aho government's 'future report', the second TVK (1996–99) engaged in a wider range of activities. On February 20 1996 the Eduskunta mandated it to work with the other standing committees to produce an assessment of the impact of technology on society and, in this connection, the TVK commissioned two major studies from outside experts. The first, which was delivered in November 1997, concerned the use of plant gene technology in food production (*Kasvigeeniteknikka ravinnontuotannossa*. Teknologian arviointija 3). The second, completed in March 1998, focused on the use

of technology in learning and teaching. (Sinko & Lehtinen 1998, 1–93.) However, lacking permanent status, the TVK experienced the same practical problems as during its first term. Indeed Tiuri has recalled how difficult it was to arrange sessions of the committee and how members came and went throughout them.

The TVK was re-nominated, again on an ad hoc basis, on April 16 1999 – albeit this time directly after the general election – and Tiuri was re-elected its chair. The Eduskunta entrusted it with four tasks over the period to the next general election in 2003. 1) It was to continue its analysis and evaluation of future development factors and models, such as Finland's place in a globalising world and natural resource utilisation. 2) It was to become fully acquainted in ways deemed appropriate by the committee with methodological questions related to research on the future. 3) When necessary it was to prepare a proposal for endorsement by parliament on the government's report on the future. 4) It was to continue, at the request of the Speaker's Council, with parliament's technology assessment exercise.

Remarkably, in December 1999, the TVK achieved permanent status against the wishes of the majority in the Constitutional Committee – which voted 13–4 against – and several party leaders. The plenary debate on the Constitutional Committee's report and the argument about whether to give the TVK permanent status will be drawn on later in this paper. It is sufficient now to note that at the crucial (and free) vote on December 13 1999, the Eduskunta approved permanent status for the TVK by 96–73. (*Helsingin Sanomat* 14.12.1999.)

The status of the TVK – a 'hoo-ha committee'?

In the plenary debate on December 10 1999 on the Constitutional Committee's report opposing permanent status for TVK, the Centre member, Lauri Oinonen, related how, having been elected (at the sixth time of asking!) at the 1999 general election, he expressed the desire to become a TVK member. On hearing this, an experienced parliamentarian exclaimed: "Don't try and get a seat there, it's a bit of a hoo-ha committee and who knows how long it will be

in existence”⁹. (PTK 123/1999 vp.) Whilst other speakers rejected the idea of it being a ‘hoo-ha committee’ or a ‘humbug committee’, relatively few MPs appear to have been as keen on becoming a TVK member as Oinonen initially was. True, Jyrki Katainen, a Conservative representing the constituency of Kuopio, and at twenty-eight years one of ten MPs under thirty, stated how he actively wanted the “intellectual, value-oriented work of TVK” which was recommended to him by his predecessor for the constituency.¹⁰ But, more typically perhaps, the deputy chair of the Centre, Maria-Kaisa Aula, admitted it was difficult to recruit a second member of the party group to join their highly enthusiastic TVK member, Kyösti Karjula. As a former TVK member, Aula voted against permanent status, claimed that “it took up too much time”, involved “too much talking” and could not see why the TVK could not continue on a flexible ad hoc basis.¹¹

This section uses both documentary sources and the postal questionnaire of TVK members to tackle four principal questions. 1) Has the TVK been seen as a ‘hoo-ha committee’ – that is, an organ of low status, low relevance and low importance – by a large number of MPs? To answer this question, TVK members were asked how they thought other MPs perceived the status of TVK. 2) Do those who have served on the committee believe the TVK to have high, or potentially high salience as a standing committee? In this connection, there is a brief review of the arguments used by those members and former TVK members favouring permanent status in line with the Speaker’s Council proposal. 3) What value do TVK members themselves attach to the work of the committee? Here an open-ended question asked: ‘Has membership of the TVK brought with it any personal benefits as, for example, the development of expertise, travel opportunities etc? 4) How committed are TVK members to the work of the committee? Do they actively seek committee membership or are they simply nominated by their parliamentary group on a ‘you, you and

you’ basis? How much time do they devote weekly to TVK business? How much truth is there in Markku Markkula’s assertion that “although the TVK does not enjoy high status, those who sit on it are generally very committed?”¹²

Whilst a ‘hoo-ha committee’ is too pejorative a description by far, it is clear that the TVK has been widely perceived as a low status standing committee and, accordingly, its work has been generally underestimated. Exactly 50% of TVK respondents believed that MPs from outside viewed the committee for the future as a low status body, whilst the other 50% thought it enjoyed middle-ranking status (one respondent ringed both ‘middle ranking’ and ‘low status’). None of the TVK members in January 1999 believed the TVK was seen to enjoy high status.

So why, then, did all respondents except one (who was absent) vote for giving the TVK permanent status? After several hours of debate on December 10, concluding December 13 1999, those in favour of making the committee permanent, in line with the Speaker’s Council proposal, used essentially pragmatic arguments. They can be summarised in five main points. 1) There were variations on the ‘not permanent, not taken seriously’ theme, something that implicitly acknowledged the inferior status of the TVK. Increased status, it was argued, would mean improved working conditions. 2) There were variations on the theme of ‘no constitutional objections to permanent status were raised by the expert lawyers consulted’. This point was given particular emphasis by the four members of the Constitutional Committee – Tuija Brax (Greens), Tarja Filatov (Social Democrats), Paula Kokkonen (Conservatives) and Veijo Puhjo (Left Alliance – who tabled a dissenting report. 3) There was ‘the Foreign Affairs Committee and Grand Committee do not really prepare legislative matters either’ line that was objected to the view of those lawyers on the Constitutional Committee who insisted that TVK did not perform a real standing committee function. 4) There were variations on the theme of ‘it reduces the wood-and-

⁹ Oinonen ultimately voted against permanent status for the TVK.

¹⁰ Interview with Jyrki Katainen 4.2.2000

¹¹ Interview with Maria-Kaisa Aula 18.5.2000.

¹² Interview with Markku Markkula 20.10.1999.

trees' problem, i.e. that the wider perspective of the TVK was vital because the narrow boundaries imposed by the standing committee system constrained the work of parliament. 5) Finally, there was the 'there's none like it' argument, alluding to the unique nature of the TVK which, it was stressed, had a strong international reputation, attracted much interest abroad and vested the Finnish Eduskunta with crucial 'value added'.¹³

Yet one speech, from the Centre Party MP, Kyösti Karjula, stood out, partly because its content was highly novel, but also because of the importance attached to permanent status as *a matter of principle*. Karjula noted that: "The reality is that at present the permanent standing committees deal primarily with government bills prepared by civil servants. It is, therefore, a very significant question of principle how we approach matters relating to the future. In my view, giving permanent status to the work relating to future questions undertaken by the Eduskunta is not simply a matter of how actively parliament engages in such work, but also how it defines its relations with the government and civil service. It has the opportunity to become an agenda-setter and a real discussion forum for the most important social questions. Giving the TVK the status of a permanent standing committee will elevate the position of parliament as a future-oriented social policy actor". When interviewed by the author, Karjula added that it was a matter of "the consolidation of democracy" and that "work on the future should not be the exclusive preserve of civil servants".¹⁴

An open-ended question was designed to assess the subjective importance TVK members attached to committee work. What was initially striking was the contrast in responses from the new committee members who joined the TVK in 1999–2000. Two claimed they had 'not yet' experienced any personal benefits (one of them subsequently left the committee) whereas a third, a Social Democrat from central Finland, commented effusively that: "The TVK has

been a lifeline for me, facilitating a real increase in my knowledge. I value very highly the discussion of principles in the committee, the full significance of which is often evident only in retrospect". Taking the responses as a whole, an "increase in expertise", the "generation of new knowledge" and a "deepening of substantive competence" were attributes of the TVK expressly referred to by 67% of members. One of the original TVK 1 members referred in similar vein to the value of "interesting seminars and expert hearings". Most expansively, a Conservative representing Uusimaa, first elected in 1996, saw in the TVK "the opportunity to deepen my substantive competence, continue to develop my international networks and undertake demanding international tasks and to deploy my knowledge and skills in different fields". A Centre MP from Oulu prioritised the personal value of TVK as allowing him to see the 'big picture', furthering his expertise, and developing contacts and connections.

Several answers suggested an important *knock-on value* of TVK work. One referred to the provision of 'good material' whilst a very new member alluded to "interesting insights into the future which I believe will be of use in my other work as a member of parliament". Although the empirical evidence is not, of course, conclusive, it certainly does nothing to contradict the response of the (then) deputy chair of the TVK to the question 'What would you say the TVK has achieved in the time [since 1996] you have been a member?' According to Tarja Filatov, "the committee itself has not done so much, but as a collection of individuals committee members have contributed significantly elsewhere".¹⁵

Finally, several questions were designed to assess the extent of the commitment of TVK members to the work of the committee, *inter alia* 'Did they actively seek committee membership and how much time do they devote weekly to TVK business?' On the first question, some discretion in interpreting the responses must be allowed. One Conservative respondent noted that "on being approached about my willingness to serve, I expressed an

¹³ For the full debate, see *Puhemiesneuvoston ehdotus uudeksi eduskunnan työjärjestykseksi* (PTK 123/1999 vp).

¹⁴ Interview with Kyösti Karjula 4.2.2000.

¹⁵ Interview with Tarja Filatov 4.2.2000.

interest". Another Social Democrat from central Finland responded that "I was certainly interested, but my party made the actual decision". In contrast, a Swedish People's Party member commented simply that "the party decided on my place". Overall, however, the overwhelming majority – 66% - of TVK members actively sought membership of the committee rather than being steered in that direction by their parliamentary group. Even in the cases of those where the initiative appeared to come from their group, the response (with one exception) appears to have been enthusiastic.

For committee members, the TVK is a 'second string committee' in the sense that they serve on at least one of the other fourteen standing committees. 17% of respondents in fact held *three* regular standing committee places, including the TVK. Indeed, as the Centre MP, Matti Vanhanen, has contended, the work undertaken by TVK cannot increase much more because MPs want to remain a member of one of the other (regular) standing committees.¹⁶ But what sort of time do members spend weekly on committee business?

In assessing their weekly time expenditure on TVK work, many respondents emphasised its variability. A Conservative from the Helsinki hinterland of Uusimaa expressly stated that it varied from week to week, but ranged between ten and fifteen hours. When upper and lower figures have been cited, an average has been calculated. All in all, TVK members spend an average of 6.3 hours weekly on TVK business. 25%, however, spend ten hours or more. Conclusions are not simple to draw. Clearly, there are those minority of members who make a considerable commitment in time to the TVK. Equally, it is almost certainly the case that, with but few exceptions, TVK members spend more time on their regular standing committee work. A young Conservative mentioned he spent four hours weekly on TVK-related work compared with ten on the education committee. Moreover, there appears no relationship between experience (longevity) on TVK and time spent on its work. If anything there is a negative correlation: the greater the years of TVK

service, the fewer hours devoted to its work each week. The original members gave three to four hours as their norm.

Taking the evidence in total, the TVK has undoubtedly been viewed as a low status committee, unattractive to lawyers in particular, which has experienced relatively poor working conditions (irregular meeting times, problems of attendance etc.). Yet members generally wanted a seat on the TVK and certainly do not see it as a 'hoo-ha committee' viz one generating much noise but little substance. They emphasised the personal benefits accruing from membership, particularly in terms of greater expertise, new insights, and the knock-on value for other standing committee work. Though a 'second string committee' (sometimes third), moreover, some members devote as much as fifteen hours weekly to TVK business. In sum, although the data are limited, they certainly do nothing to contradict Markku Markkula's proposition that, "although the TVK does not enjoy high status, those who serve on it are generally very committed".

The TVK's role in the standing committee system – a 'service committee'?

The third section of this paper seeks to analyse the TVK's role in the standing committee system by posing three basic questions. 1) What have been the distinctive features of the TVK when compared with the other standing committees? 2) How well integrated is the TVK into the standing committee system? 3) How (if at all) can the TVK be classified? Is it completely *sui generis* or are there comparable types in other legislative assemblies?

As a standing committee, the TVK is distinctive in several respects. It does not initiate or deliberate on legislative proposals in the manner of the other fourteen standing committees, nor does it review the government's annual Budget proposal. When necessary (and at least every electoral term), the TVK does prepare a proposal for endorsement by parliament on the government's report on the future and it is increasingly trying to influence the focus of government reports. In short, it does have a deliberative function in respect of government reports on the future, though not government

¹⁶ Interview with Matti Vanhanen 18.5.2000.

bills. Moreover, though it cannot initiate legislation, it can and does initiate projects in connection with parliament's technology assessment exercise. Like other standing committees, the TVK forms sub-groups to develop particular themes and projects. The four-strong 'Energy 2010' is a case in point. However, the crucial point is that TVK is not a routine part of the legislative process.

Unlike other standing committees, the TVK does not perform a British-style 'select committee function' in the sense of monitoring the activities of a particular government department, nor does it have a corresponding minister in the cabinet. Most of its contacts with the political executive are with those persons in the Prime Minister's Office engaged in preparing and coordinating future reports. The TVK is in fact the only cross-sectoral standing committee and is distinguished by the sheer range and diversity of the matters before it and the time-frame within which they are discussed. In the latter respect, its chair, Martti Tiuri, has argued that the Eduskunta should contemplate the future over a period of between five and twenty years. (Tiuri 1999, 189.) In the former, in its first report in the 1998 Eduskunta session, it is stated that the TVK considers topics ranging from biodiversity and global ethics to poverty in inner city areas. (TuVM 1/1998 vp – VNS 3/1997 vp, p. 83.)

Although the TVK is not based on a specific policy sector – the economy, environment, education or whatever – it does bear responsibility for assessing the impact of technology on society, albeit working with the other standing committees. The technology assessment exercise in fact provided the fundamental rationale for the nomination of a TVK 2 in 1996.¹⁷ Co-

operation with the other standing committees on matters related to the technology assessment has followed a standard pattern. Invitations are sent out to the relevant committees to form a steering group (*ohjausryhmä*) for each project and this usually consists of between six and eight members, half from TVK and half from the other standing committees. For the report on gene technology in food production, invitations to join the steering group were sent to the standing committees on agriculture and forestry, the environment (whose representative was very active) and the economy. For the project on the use of technology in learning and teaching, invitations were sent, among others, to the standing committee on education. The steering group is vital in such practical matters as determining the relative costings of particular laboratories and in instructing the successful one to produce responses in a form (language) that is intelligible to parliamentarians.

Finally, several aspects of the TVK's working practices have distinguished it from the other standing committees. There has been the relationship between the committee members and the specialists consulted. Expert hearings in the other standing committees are generally stiff and formal. The experts have their say, the MPs may ask a few questions, but no comments are offered. The discussion only really begins when the experts have left. However, as Kimmo Kiljunen has noted: "In hearing top experts, TVK members are not satisfied with simply putting questions. They contest matters in a manner reminiscent of an academic seminar". (Kiljunen 1998, 350.) Then there has been the pronounced international orientation in the committee's work. The TVK has developed extensive foreign networks, organised a series of international events (for example, the conference on *Politics and the Internet* in Helsinki in January 1999) and adopted an innovative, global approach to research on future issues. It has, moreover, been highly entrepreneurial in pro-

¹⁷ In June 1995, Tutkas suggested that the newly-elected Eduskunta should instigate a technology assessment and in September the same year, in a private initiative tabled in connection with the Budget, Martti Tiuri moved that this should be followed up. Accordingly, at the behest of the Speaker's Council, the Office of Parliament (*kansliatoimikunta*) created a working group – which was to report by December 31 1995 – to consider the organisation of the technology assessment exercise. Without the support of the Speaker, Riitta Uosukainen, this working group would not

have been set up. It recommended that the assessment should get underway and that responsibility for it be vested in the TVK, which was duly reconstituted on February 27 1996. (Correspondence from Martti Tiuri 19.6.2000.)

moting the scope of its activities.¹⁸ But to what extent have the TVK's distinguishing characteristics militated against its integration into the standing committee system?

The strong impression from the plenary debate on December 10 and December 13 1999 was that the TVK was not seen by many parliamentarians as complementing and/or reinforcing the deliberative function of the sectoral committees. Kyösti Karjula presented the TVK as essentially a *service committee* (palvelleva valiokunta) that can view the future in its entirety in such a way as to improve the service to the other standing committees. Yet it does not appear that the TVK's service function has been effectively performed in relation to the consideration of legislation undertaken by the other standing committees. Many speakers in fact revealed a suspicious, even resentful attitude towards the committee and its role in the standing committee system.

Karjula himself alluded to 'corridor discussions' in which it was claimed that the TVK had appropriated future issues. His Centre Party colleague, Johannes Leppänen (who voted against permanent status), insisted that the TVK must not be proprietorial and monopolise a particular subject. Rather, the future should form part of the work of all standing committees. The Conservative, Eero Akaan-Penttilä, held that, to the best of his knowledge, the plenary had not delegated work to the TVK nor had the other standing committees profited from the TVK's specialist knowledge because it had not been compulsory to consult it. His party colleague, Kaarina Dromberg, observed that the TVK appeared too independent in its working relative to the other standing committees and that there needed to be more co-operation. For his part, the Swedish People's Party delegate, Klaus Bremer, expressed astonishment that par-

liamentarians appeared to view the existence of the TVK as a vote of no confidence in the work of their standing committee. He added that the various standing committees should have the opportunity of delegating to the TVK matters in need of expeditious resolution which relate to the work of the standing committee in question. In sum, it was plain from the plenary debate on the issue of permanent status that most speakers did not believe the service function was being effectively performed or, put simply, that the Eduskunta was getting the most out of the TVK.

Karjula described the TVK, quite reasonably, as a 'service committee' that should serve and strengthen the deliberative function of the other standing committees by making available to them innovative background material on a range of future issues. But are other labels equally or indeed more appropriate? Can the TVK, for example, be classified as a 'corporate committee' à la Loewenberg and Patterson?

Prima facie support for such a description can be gained from its first report in 1998. This states that "the TVK provides ... free and open discussion remarkably free from the constraints of party politics..." It is true that in contrast to the other standing committees there is no party line as such and discussion proceeds over and above the government-opposition binary divide. Yet differences in partisan perspective almost inevitably emerge over such fundamental value-based questions as globalisation, the integration of markets, the challenges facing the welfare state, the need for sustainable development and the information technology revolution. During the 1996-99 TVK 2, for example, there was an undoubted tension in the deliberations on the government's report *Finland and the Future of Europe*. The high-tech, science orientation of the Conservative chair, Martti Tiuri, and his highly committed party colleague, Markku Markkula, was opposed by the Social Democratic contingent of Kalevi Olin, Kimmo Kiljunen and Tarja Filatov. Indeed, the fundamental challenge of producing TVK reports has been to achieve compromise formulas that have successfully reconciled differences over ends and means. Kiljunen puts the point graphically. "The key words in our analysis may be 'prosperity, competitiveness,

¹⁸ As Tiuri has written: "The TVK has paid visits to Finnish universities and science parks to familiarise itself with their research activities and to foreign parliaments to monitor the progress of their technology assessment exercise. The TVK has sought to comprehend the success of the south-east Asian 'tigers' – and South Korean in particular – and the prospective markets there for Finnish business". (Tiuri 1999, 190.) Video conferences have been organised between the TVK and experts from the aforementioned countries.

global accommodation, advanced technology and economic growth. But social change can be viewed using different terms such as human welfare, the influence of globalisation, equality, a conducive work environment and sustainable development. This is not just a difference over words but of distinguishing ends from means.” (Kiljunen 1998, 352.)

The conventional wisdom among TVK members has been that the real debate of issues and, by inference, the basic ideological divisions among its members, have represented a healthy counterpoise to the neutered character of Finland’s ‘consensus politics’. The TVK is viewed as essential because extremely broad-based governing coalitions have significantly reduced the capacity of the legislature as a whole to influence public policy. Can the TVK, then, be regarded as a strong policy influencing committee? Clearly an answer to that question rests principally on an assessment of whether the TVK has been able to generate a long-term perspective in parliamentary decision-making and this is the subject of the final part of the paper.

The TVK: an ‘agenda-setting committee’?

In many ways, the TVK has functioned like a lobby group, lobbying both government and parliament on the importance of particular issues and in this way seeking to define a relevant agenda for policy-making over a period of two decades or so ahead. How has it sought to set the future agenda and how effective has it been in breaking down the short-term, sectoral approaches reputedly characterising the legislative process? This final section will first outline the methods used by TVK to achieve its objectives and then discuss the views of committee members about its efficacy to date. The TVK has sought to canvass an agenda of ‘future issues’ in the following main ways.

1) By making direct approaches to the prime minister with a view to defining the specific themes of government reports on the future. On June 16 1999, the TVK wrote to Paavo Lipponen requesting that, instead of a general report on the future, the government should present parliament with a report

focusing on the problems of the information society. In its response to the Constitutional Committee’s consideration of the ‘government report for 1999’ (*toimenpidekertomus*), the TVK narrowed this down further to a government report on the *digital economy and competence society*.

- 2) By commissioning high quality reports on ‘future issues’ – in relation to the technology assessment exercise for example – and getting them debated on the floor of the Eduskunta. This has involved *inter alia* working to influence the Speaker’s Council on the content of scheduled ‘topical plenary debates’. Thus, on February 23, 2000 the TVK sent a memorandum to the Eduskunta Speaker requesting that the topical debate set for March 15 be a discussion of the future of work. The approach was strategically timed a week before the government presented its guidelines for the 2001 budget. The TVK noted that work was a basic prerequisite of Finnish welfare and that the committee had selected it as its main theme for the present parliamentary term.
- 3) By organising briefings for MPs on salient issues. On the eve of the plenary debate on March 14, the TVK organised an ‘information session’ in the Grand Committee room at which the TVK’s view of work in the future was presented. Several documents had earlier been distributed to MPs. They included a seminar series publication on the future of work prepared in co-operation with the Academic Network for Future Research and a study entitled *Globalisation and the End of Work: The Economy and Employment to the Year 2030* produced by the State Economic Research Centre.
- 4) By creating a regularised parliamentary forum for the discussion of broader issues. In October 1999, the TVK unanimously decided to create a deliberative arena for fellow parliamentarians led by a series of ‘experienced wise heads’. Seventy-seven persons (approximately two-thirds of them men) were selected as ‘information providers’, ‘problem solvers’ and ‘innovative thinkers’. (*Helsingin Sanomat*, 8.10.1999.) The initiative represented a development of the TVK’s *Studia Parliamentia* lecture series in

which experts from different fields gave an half-hour presentation in the Grand Committee room which was open to all those working in parliament. The presentations were not, however, followed by any discussion. The meetings of ‘experienced wise heads’ are planned to take place four or five times annually, each topic being introduced by five or six ‘wise heads’ and then opened out for deeper discussion. The first was held on December 1 1999 on the theme ‘The Social Responsibility of Companies and Company Directors’. (Tiihonen 1999a.)

5. By seeking to have an indirect impact on, and to give a longer-term perspective to parliamentary decision-making through stimulating the public discussion of future issues. In this connection, the TVK has provided a useful forum for leading public figures wanting publicity for their views. Former president, Mauno Koivisto (1982-94), has on several occasions contacted the TVK chair with a view to a channel for putting his opinion on topical issues (the government line on Austria, the question of Finnish involvement in ‘peace enforcement’ operations etc). The TVK has sought added authority for its position by consulting directly with the ordinary public. It is planning a discussion forum for young persons operating spontaneously via the Internet and has also stated its intention of being peripatetic by organising meetings in various parts of the country to discuss relevant issues.
6. Finally, TVK may also be said to exert influence through its members who can act as ‘opinion leaders’ both on their sectoral standing committees and the floor of the Eduskunta. Testimony to the value and potential ‘knock on value’ of committee service came from one member who related how she “felt so dumb” during her first term as an MP and how the pieces of the legislative jigsaw did not fit together. She now felt able to distinguish the wood from the trees. TVK members are constantly involved in updating their knowledge and understanding of methodological developments. For instance, a full day was set aside on May 19 2000 for the preparation of scenarios for ‘future policy-making’. The TVK’s staff – two secre-

taries and two clerks – is small but very energetic. On the question of opinion leadership, it may be significant that over 60% of the speakers in the ‘topical plenary debate’ on work on March 15 were TVK members.

Turning from the question of how the TVK has sought to promote a stronger future orientation in policy-making to the issue of how effective it has been, it may be noted that in its first report in the 1998 Eduskunta session, the TVK was upbeat about its achievements to date. “The objective of bringing a long-term perspective to parliamentary decisions has been achieved at least in part. The TVK has engaged in a dialogue with the government on future questions and, in this way, promoted the willingness of the administration and MPs to take up new themes and problems for deliberation. At the same time, the TVK has stimulated public debate through its reports and discussion events”. (TuVM/1998 vp – VNS 3/1997 vp.) In a similar vein, a senior parliamentary official commented that: “I think the TVK has been good at producing reports of high standard and initiating debates. It has sensitised parliamentarians to consider long-term perspectives”. But he added the caveat that “the TVK has not had any direct impact on the day-to-day business of legislation”. In other words, there is good reason to doubt whether the TVK is a strong policy influencing committee (see the previous section) in relation to its *direct* influence on the content of the reports of other standing committees and the content of government legislation (the content of government reports on the future will be touched on shortly).

It might reasonably be countered that the criteria used in the preparation of legislation do reflect a greater concern for the longer-term future. In the early 1990s, when Finland plunged into the depths of recession, and there was an urgent need to cut public spending, short-term economic considerations were understandably paramount. In the present strong-growth climate it may be that environmental and energy concerns, the implications for sustainable development etc are weighed more in drafting government proposals – and, indeed, in their deliberation in the sectoral standing committees. But even assuming this is the case,

attributing it directly to the impact of the TVK is impossible. After all, individual ministries are required to produce a future strategy covering about two decades ahead, the Greens have been in the cabinet since 1995 and a variety of international environmental commitments have been undertaken. All we can comment on is how effective its members feel the TVK has been in promoting an agenda of future issues – MPs outside the committee would doubtless have a different view – and how the TVK has formed part of the process of future policy-making.

In fact, the postal questionnaire revealed that a large majority of TVK members believed the committee had been effective in respect of its primary objective. 73% of respondents thought the TVK had been ‘very successful’ or ‘reasonably successful’ in bringing a long-term perspective to the parliamentary decision-making process. In view of a comment from a Centre Party MP that “the committee has been more influential outside the Eduskunta than inside it”, it was interesting to note that a still higher proportion – nearly 82% – of members thought the TVK had been ‘very successful’ or ‘reasonably successful’ in stimulating a public debate on future issues. Reference was made to the good media response to the TVK reports – especially the one on plant gene technology – and the publicity given to the meetings of ‘experienced wise heads’. Committee members in short were broadly satisfied that the TVK was performing a valuable socialisation function in relation both to political elites and the mass public.

They were singularly dissatisfied, however, with the committee’s relationship with the political executive. Indeed, in its response to the Constitutional Committee concerning the government’s annual report for 1999, the TVK adopted a decidedly ‘hawkish’ tone when insisting that mutual contacts between government and parliament should be strengthened as part of a dialogue on future issues.¹⁹ Not a single TVK respondent, moreover, believed that the governmental machine was competent to deal with questions relating to the future. Re-

sponses referred to the government’s lack of time, its concentration on the matters in its programme, the fact that the activity of the political executive was too sectoralised (department-based) and the way “everybody passes the buck and nothing gets done”. Broadening the perspective, one member held that “the more widely and openly future issues are discussed, the better”, whilst another insisted that “parliament should acquire its own information and form its own view of future issues, although a dialogue with the government is important”. There was no mention of the lack of a minister with specific responsibility for future issues, though the TVK has intermittently canvassed such an appointment.

Whilst the government has been clearly reluctant to concede the initiative to the TVK and/or be told what particular theme to focus on in its next future report, the TVK has been involved at the consultative stage prior to the preparation of government reports on the future. This is an important, since there is no tradition in Finland – in contrast to Sweden or, earlier, Norway – of parliamentary involvement at the (pre-) formulation stage of public policy via the commission system. TVK has been an actor in the consultation process on future reports orchestrated from the Prime Minister’s Office and involving, among others, the various government departments, regional councils, local government bodies, businesses and academics. Both the TVK and cabinet, although part of the legislature and executive respectively, have been part of a policy community on future issues and (perhaps inevitably in a small country), they deploy largely the same network of experts. Labouring the point somewhat, the TVK is in a position to influence the content and approach of government reports and then subsequently to deliberate on the shortcomings of the report in its response to parliament.

For example, in autumn 1998, and again over summer 2000, the government organised a series of so-called ‘future forums’ in different parts of the country at which ministers addressed particular themes in the presence of invited representatives of the regions. Several TVK members were involved as speakers. How much influence this exercise afforded the committee must necessarily remain an open ques-

¹⁹ TuVL 2/2000 vp, *Hallituksen toimenpidekertomus vuodelta 1999*.

tion. The TVK paid lip-service to the valuable dialogue between government and parliament which these regional forums fostered. Yet there was more than a hint of a competitive relationship between the committee and the cabinet in the way its secretary urged the importance of regional equality in the economic, technological, employment and educational fields. These, she noted, were priorities of the TVK. (Tiihonen 1999b.) What is undeniable is that TVK cannot be by-passed in the consultation process. All in all, the TVK is perhaps best described as *an agenda-setting standing committee* in that it canvasses, and contributes to setting a wider policy agenda that reflects the future challenges facing Finnish society. In a comparative perspective it may not be difficult to identify agenda-setting bodies that are involved in the long-term planning process. The various economic and social councils are cases in point. But for a parliamentary standing committee to be agenda-setting in the manner of the Finnish TVK is much more unusual.

Conclusion: A Model for Parliaments in the Future?

In the Declaration of Athens, drafted by the second European Parliamentary Conference on Information and Communication Technologies on February 3-4 2000, it was stated that "All parliaments should have some mechanisms for looking ahead at the broader social impact of current technology change". Distinctively, the Finnish Eduskunta has vested this function in a specific standing committee, the Committee for the Future. Readers of this article will doubtless make their own assessment of whether the TVK model is one that might usefully be transplanted outside Finland, although institutional diffusion – replicating a particular blueprint in another political culture – is no guarantee of its successful adaptation. What can be asserted, however, is that the existence of a specific committee for the future has served at very least to highlight questions of widespread importance regarding the role of legislatures in the transition to the information society, the changing nature of representative democracy and, above all, the competence of parliamentarians to make informed judgements on crucial policy matters.

Is it the case that the technical knowledge levels of MPs should be continuously raised so as to enable them thoroughly to investigate issues and by extension safeguard the successful working of representative democracy?

This has been the basic thesis of the TVK chairman since 1996, Martti Tiuri. He has argued that in Finland until the 1950s, representative democracy worked well because MPs had their own experience of work and society and the issues to be resolved were generally those on which they were experts. Since then, society has diversified exponentially and MPs have gradually become professional politicians lacking immediate experience of most of the matters they consider. Tiuri goes much further by insisting that decisions about nuclear power, gene technology, mad cow disease or energy taxation require personal knowledge. They cannot be left to experts – not least because they cannot agree among themselves – nor is acting on intuition good enough. "If the Eduskunta wants to decide on nuclear power, the MPs should know about nuclear power, other power sources and energy technology. All Finnish MPs should acquire a thorough grounding in forestry because Finland lives off the forests." (Tiuri 1999, 186.) He concluded provocatively that "when a former Finnish prime minister states that nuclear power stations are dangerous, he has failed in his duty to go into things properly"! (Tiuri 1999, 187).

When, shortly after the February 2000 election, the losing presidential candidate, Esko Aho, the Centre chairman, requested a sabbatical year in Harvard to recharge his batteries, it sparked an unusually vigorous public debate about the nature of an MP's responsibility to his electors. According to Esko Helle, a Constitutional Committee member, the MP does not have a job or profession – from which he/she can get sabbatical leave – but a position of trust which cannot be set aside. (*Helsingin Sanomat* 23.3.2000.) However, shortly after the Eduskunta had voted (relatively narrowly) to grant him his 'year out', I discussed with Aho the reasons for his period abroad. "Time to think about fundamental questions" was the gist of his reply. He observed that until as late as the 1960s Finnish society had been based on the land and farm ownership defined social rela-

tions. For three decades or so thereafter, society was based on labour and paid work of various sorts and social welfare was facilitated through taxation. The advent of the ‘competence society’, he continued, raised a tangle of issues relating to the nature of work, sources of taxation etc.²⁰ The fundamental question that Aho seemed to want to research is: ‘On what basis is the society of the future to be organised?’ Ironically, Aho voted against permanent status for the TVK. However, this is surely a question for all Western parliaments whether there is a specific committee for the future or not.

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²⁰ Interview with Esko Aho 19.5.2000.