Committees in the Finnish Eduskunta: cross-party cooperation and legislative scrutiny behind closed doors

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Abstract

Drawing on interviews and parliamentary documents, this chapter provides an in-depth analysis of how the committees in the Finnish Eduskunta work and how influential they are inside the parliament and vis-à-vis the government. The Eduskunta is a highly stable institution, with a set of rules and behavioural norms that have evolved gradually over the decades. The same applies to its committees, which are important fora for both the scrutiny of draft bills and for cross-party cooperation, including between governing and opposition parties. Yet normally the government-opposition dynamic structures the debates and party discipline is strong. This chapter argues that the Eduskunta committees wield more influence than previously estimated, but that this influence is difficult to capture through standard approaches used by parliamentary scholars. Finnish MPs appreciate the confidentiality of committee meetings, and the parliamentary culture does not appear conducive to embracing more transparency or participatory channels of influence.

Introduction

The Finnish political system is normally categorized as semi-presidential, with the executive functions divided between an elected president and a cabinet that is accountable to the Eduskunta, the unicameral national legislature. However, the new constitution[i], which entered into force in 2000, completed a period of far-reaching constitutional change that curtailed presidential powers and brought the Finnish political system closer to a normal parliamentary democracy. Cabinet formation is now based on partisan negotiations and the president is almost completely excluded from the policy process in domestic matters. European Union (EU) matters belong to the competence of the

government, while foreign policy is co-led between the president and the government (Karvonen et al., 2016).

These constitutional changes mean that the Eduskunta is much more at the centre of things than before. However, Parliament's ability to influence policy and ensure government accountability is mitigated by EU membership and a tradition of strong coalition cabinets. This is where the committees come in. Like the other Nordic legislatures, the Eduskunta is more of a 'working parliament' and emphasis is on activities in its committees. According to Arter (1999, pp. 211-217) the three criteria of a working parliament are a division of labour among parliamentary committees mirroring the jurisdictions of the respective ministries, standing orders that lift committee work above plenary sessions, and a work culture where MPs concentrate on legislative work instead of grand debates on the floor. Eduskunta decision-making is based on interaction between party groups and committees, with the latter also providing a key forum for deliberations and bargaining between political parties.

Drawing on interviews, parliamentary documents[ii], and existing research, this chapter provides an in-depth analysis of how the Eduskunta committees work and how influential they are within the Eduskunta and vis-à-vis the government. It starts by outlining the structure and formal competencies of the committees and then proceeds to examine the actual scrutiny performed by MPs in the committees. Behavioural indicators include legislative amendments, committee reports, number and types of experts heard by the committees, and votes and dissenting opinions expressed in the committees. Specific attention is paid to the various outreach activities of the committees and to the roles of the Grand Committee, the Foreign Affairs Committee, and the Committee for the Future. This chapter argues that the Eduskunta committees wield more influence than previously estimated,

but that this influence is difficult to capture through standard approaches used by parliamentary scholars.

Institutions, actors, and interactions

The committee system

The Eduskunta is undoubtedly an institutionalized legislature. Its internal structures have evolved gradually over the decades and party discipline is strong, with MPs expected to toe the party line in both the plenary and in the committees. Institutionalization also applies to committees, regarding both their jurisdictions and internal procedures (Forsten, 2005; Helander et al., 2007).

The number of committees has remained quite stable, with an increase of only three after the Second World War. In 1991, two committees were abolished, and three new ones established. Committee jurisdictions were also reshuffled. As a result, the competencies of individual standing committees largely mirror the jurisdiction of the respective ministries. The number of ministries is currently 12, including the Prime Minister's Office. According to Section 35 of the Constitution:

> "For each electoral term, the Parliament appoints the Grand Committee, the Constitutional Law Committee, the Foreign Affairs Committee, the Finance Committee, the Audit Committee and the other standing Committees provided in the Parliament's Rules of Procedure. In addition, the Parliament appoints Committees ad hoc for the preparation of, or inquiry into, a given matter".

The Eduskunta currently has 17 permanent committees, including the Grand Committee which is the EU Committee. The permanent committees are: the Finance Committee (established in 1863), Legal Affairs Committee (1863), Commerce Committee (1863), Constitutional Law Committee (1907), Grand Committee (1907), Agriculture and Forestry Committee (1907), Social Affairs and Health Committee (1907), Education and Culture Committee (1908), Foreign Affairs Committee (1918),

Transport and Communications Committee (1929), Defence Committee (1937), Administration Committee (1991), Employment and Equality Committee (1991), Environment Committee (1991), Committee for the Future (1993), Audit Committee (2007), and Intelligence Supervision Committee (2019). While the other committees are essentially appointed after each parliamentary election, the Intelligence Supervision Committee is established once the government has entered office after the parliamentary elections, unless the Eduskunta decides otherwise based on a proposal from the Speaker's Council. The Constitutional Law Committee is quite exceptional, as its principal function is to issue *ex ante* statements on the constitutionality of government bills and other matters. Therefore, it is supposed to be above 'party politics' and to base its opinions on legal evidence provided by expert witnesses (Lavapuro, 2010).

According to the parliamentary rules of procedure, each permanent committee has 17 members and nine alternate members, apart from the Grand Committee (25 members and 13 alternate members), the Finance Committee (21 and 19), the Audit Committee (11 and six), and the Intelligence Supervision Committee (11 and two).[iii] A Committee has a quorum when at least two-thirds of its members are present, unless a higher quorum is specifically required for a given matter. The Speaker of the Eduskunta or government ministers (who with certain exceptions serve simultaneously as MPs) do not sit on committees. Committees can establish sections or working groups for specific topics. The Finance Committee has eight permanent sections that prepare decisions for the whole committee. Each committee has a secretariat led by the committee secretary. Several committees have four clerks, whilst others, particularly those with broader jurisdictions, have more staff (six to ten). The secretariats draft the committee agendas, reports and statements, compile the initial list of expert witnesses to be heard, and handle general matters related to committee organization and meetings.

Committees meet two to four times per week. The meetings are held behind closed doors unless specifically decided otherwise. This is regarded as a common feature of Nordic parliaments to emphasize the advantages of trust-based negotiation in closed settings in which opinion exchange and

party-political bargaining can happen more easily among committee members. Normally only a condensed version of committee minutes, containing agenda items and related documents, participants, heard expert witnesses, and final decisions, is publicized after a meeting. The Eduskunta committees have increased the number of public meetings, but their number is still very small with notable variation between committees. Between 2008 and 2014, the committees held 44 public meetings, with 15 of these organized by the Committee for the Future. During the same time period, the total number of committee meetings was 10246. In addition, committees held six public hearings related to Citizens' Initiatives (Seo, 2017, pp. 97-98).

Committee assignments

Each committee has a chair and a vice chair, with the exception of the Grand Committee, which has a chair and two vice-chairs. Often, individual MPs act as the chair of the same committee for a long period, thereby leaving a strong imprint on its work. These positions are distributed between the party groups according to their respective seat shares (following the d'Hondt method). While the chair has some level of discretion when it comes to calling committee meetings, the committees essentially meet according to their established weekly schedules. Otherwise, the discretionary powers of committee chairs are limited. The committees decide, if needed, by majority and the goal is to arrive at unanimous decisions regarding matters of committee work and organization. The chair nonetheless performs an important function in building consensus, making sure that timetables are adhered to, and that committee operations proceed smoothly.

Eduskunta committees do not utilize rapporteurs. Party groups have their own coordinators or spokespersons in the committees that act as a link between the committee and the party group. Normally, the coordinators are more experienced MPs. The committee coordinators of governing parties, in particular, can be very influential in both the committees and in their party groups, making sure if needed that MPs are present and support the government proposals. Traditionally, female MPs

have been under-represented both among committee chairs and party group coordinators, but recent developments indicate a more even distribution between men and women (Forsten, 2005; Holli, 2014, pp. 143-145). In the fall of 2019, ten out of the 17 committees were chaired by female MPs, an all-time record (Siukola et al., 2020, p. 42).

Typically, an MP holds seats in two committees, or is a member in one or two committees and an alternate member in another committee. The committee assignments are for the four-year electoral period, but reassignments occur inside party groups during the electoral term. The composition of each committee reflects the relative strength of the parliamentary groups, although party groups can also be flexible and trade places between them. Within party groups, MPs are asked to indicate to the group leaders their preferred committees, and groups try as far as possible to accommodate such wishes. The procedures vary between parties. For example, after the 2003 elections, the Centre Party and the Social Democrats utilized a form in which MPs listed four preferred committees, National Coalition MPs submitted a list of five preferred committees via email, Left Alliance MPs expressed their preferences verbally to the group leaders, and assignments in the Swedish People's Party were based on discussions in the group (Forsten, 2005, p. 108). Party groups' leaderships decide on the allocation of committee seats to their MPs, with formal votes as last resort.

Seniority, professional and educational background, policy expertise, and reputation or loyalty in the group explain both committee assignments and selection of committee chairs (Forsten, 2005; Holli, 2014, pp. 136-140; Björk et al., 2018; Siukola et al., 2020). Constituency concerns also matter, with representatives seeking places in committees whose jurisdictions cover the interests of their geographical and/or sectoral constituencies (Raunio & Ruotsalainen, 2018). Some committees, particularly those on Agriculture and Forestry, and Defence, have tended to attract mainly male MPs (Forsten, 2005; Holli, 2014; Siukola et al., 2020). Finance and Foreign Affairs have been regarded as the most prestigious committees, with Constitutional Law, Social and Health Affairs, and recently the Grand Committee counting among the more desired committees as well. The Legal Affairs and

the Commerce committees have been seen as the least attractive and many first-time MPs were assigned to them (Wiberg & Mattila, 1997; Forsten, 2005; Holli, 2014). MPs can develop considerable specialization through serving multiple electoral terms in the same committee, but obviously the length of service in the same committee depends on several factors, not least on the overall turnover of representatives and whether the MP had upon entering the Eduskunta received a place in her or his preferred committee. According to Forsten (2005, pp. 134-135) only 11 percent of the MPs had served in the same committee for more than two electoral terms, while three percent had sat in the same committee for more than three electoral terms. Overall, more experienced MPs tend to navigate to more high-ranking committees.

Hearings

When processing the Government's bills and other matters, the committees routinely hear experts that primarily represent the public sector and non-governmental organisations (NGO). Normally, the selection of experts is fairly straightforward. The committees have their 'usual suspects' and the committee secretary draws up a list who should be heard on any particular issue. Committee members can suggest additional names, and typically such additions are accepted. Often, only a few experts give evidence, although more complex matters may draw 10 to 20 experts. In extreme cases (including the reform of social and health services during the 2015 to 2019 electoral term, see below), over 100 evidence-givers are heard. Analyzing the parliamentary data of committee consultations during 1997 to 2014, a total of 10,030 experts were heard by the committees in 2014 alone.[iv] 60.5 percent were from the public sector (including the civil servants in the ministries responsible for the matters), 2.7 percent represented the private sector, whilst 27.4 percent came from the third sector and 9.1 percent were academic experts (Seo, 2017, p. 131).

Hearings are mostly held in closed committee rooms with tight time schedules and restricted modes of communication. The reliance on the 'usual suspects' limits the diversity of information received.

For example, the Constitutional Law Committee relies on certain professors of law (Keinänen & Wiberg, 2012), while Social Affairs and Health actively hears the views of the major labour market organizations. According to *Helsingin Sanomat*, the leading national daily newspaper, representatives from business and industry sectors were heard twice as often as trade union representatives between 1998 and 2013. That data also showed organized interest groups to be overall much more represented in parliamentary work than under-organized minorities or value-oriented NGOs.[v] In their survey of committee chairs and secretaries, Ahtonen and Keinänen (2012) found that civil servants from the ministry responsible for preparing the matter were seen to have the most influence on committee positions, followed by various independent experts such as academics. Least influential were representatives of NGOs and, perhaps surprisingly, business interests. Overall, actors with better resources tend to be more represented and, also, more influential. Holli and Saari (2009) and Siukola et al. (2020) in turn showed that women were heard less than men by the committees. Media and civil society activists have argued for the introduction of a transparent lobbyist registration system, but the Eduskunta has been reluctant to adopt such a lobby registry[vi] (Seo, 2017, pp. 124-142; Seo & Raunio, 2017, pp. 626-627; Helander & Pekonen, 2007, pp. 81-98).

Apart from committee hearings, there are no processes allowing citizens or civil society actors to express their opinions on matters under committee deliberation. Nor have the Eduskunta committees commonly practiced outbound trips for field investigation and public consultation. Committees do, however, travel abroad: between 1997 and 2004, committees made almost 300 trips abroad (Helander & Pekonen, 2007, p. 99). The Citizens' Initiative, introduced in 2012, has somewhat increased parliamentary transparency since the committees have held open hearings when deliberating the initiatives that have reached the required threshold of 50,000 signatures. Overall, the Eduskunta committees' engagement with civil society is practiced mainly through neo-corporatist channels of 'functional representation'; individual citizens beyond established organizations and professional

experts can hardly influence the normal legislative process (for a more detailed analysis, see Seo, 2017).

Decision-making and committee culture

The justification for committees meeting behind closed doors is to facilitate confidential exchange of views, both between parliamentary groups and between the legislature and the executive, which in turn should result in more informed and constructive decision-making. The 'Committee Manual' (see endnote ii) explicitly instructs MPs not to leak information about committee debates. Interview evidence indicates that MPs themselves appreciate the closed committee environment and there have been essentially no plans for changing to public committee meetings.

Committees are important forafor bargaining between parties of different ideological colours, including between the government and opposition. The fragmented party system, with no party winning more than 25 percent of the votes in recent elections, also facilitates consensual governance and ideological convergence between political parties. The debates are for the most part constructive and fact-based, but genuine party-political confrontations cannot be avoided. Yet, normally the government-opposition dynamic structures the debates and party discipline is strong (at least in law proposals or other matters contained in the government programme), with cabinet parties' MPs defending the government's proposals. MPs of cabinet parties seated in the committee can hold their own meetings if required. Particularly in more salient issues, the MPs of the party seated in the committee convene to discuss group positions, with the group coordinator on the committee in charge of such meetings. Inside whole party groups, members respect the autonomy of MPs seated in the committees and generally do not intervene in matters processed by the committees. Representatives have stated that there is not sufficient time for genuine debate (Pekonen, 2011; Mykkänen, 2010; Rinne, 2020).

Committees reach decisions either by unanimity or by voting, but the goal is to arrive at unanimous decisions where possible. Votes must be held when MPs table dissenting opinions (officially 'objections' in the case of reports) to the committee reports and statements. Committee reports often contain a dissenting opinion, with the percentage of reports including one ranging from between approximately 30 percent in the early 1970's to 15 percent in 2001 (Helander & Pekonen, 2007, pp. 69-71). A more recent study that examined both reports and statements found that the number of dissenting opinions increased between the late 1990s and 2011, with over 20 percent of the reports and statements containing a dissenting view towards the end of the 2007 to 2011 electoral term (Mattila, 2014, pp. 128-130). The Defence Committee, Foreign Affairs Committee, and partially also the Grand Committee have different decision-making cultures, as there the consensual approach prevails with hardly any formal votes taken. Interestingly, committee debates often find coalition partners questioning the government line – thus offering evidence for the Martin and Vanberg (2011) theorem about committees providing a forum for coalition parties to 'keep tabs' on one another.

Committees in the policy cycle

Strong formal rights in the shadow of majority governments

Procedurally, Eduskunta committees are vested with significant policy-influencing powers. Committee deliberations are a compulsory part of the legislative process, they precede the plenary stage, and committees must report to the plenary on all matters under consideration except private members' bills and motions. However, strong majority governments also enjoy majorities in the Eduskunta committees, with the consequence that committee influence is dependent on the cohesion of the governing parties' parliamentary groups. Should government bills encounter unexpected problems in the party groups or a committee of the Eduskunta, the government approaches their parliamentary groups about the matter. Often, this exchange occurs inside individual governing parties between the party leader or another minister and the chair of the parliamentary group. In other

instances, the committee chair and party group spokespersons in the committee can be involved. Such exchanges are fairly routine, and the problems are more difficult to solve when the cabinet is not cohesive and/or the issue is not included in the government programme. If the issue at hand concerns the implementation of the cabinet programme, the PM or other ministers typically remind the MPs (on some occasions publicly) about their duty to respect the programme.

The parliamentary agenda has become busier over the decades and is essentially filled with the Government's proposals and EU matters. In fact, committees must give priority to government bills and EU affairs in their meetings. Hence, committees have very limited possibilities to influence the agenda of the Eduskunta. Nonetheless, committees (and the whole Eduskunta) enjoy strong information rights. According to Section 47 of the Constitution,

> The Parliament has the right to receive from the Government the information it needs in the consideration of matters. The appropriate Minister shall ensure that Committees and other parliamentary organs receive without delay the necessary documents and other information in the possession of the authorities. A Committee has the right to receive information from the Government or the appropriate Ministry on a matter within its competence. The Committee may issue a statement to the Government or the Ministry on the basis of the information.[vii]

These constitutional provisions are very important in the sense that they prompt the government to providing the relevant information without any specific requests from the MPs. Moreover, the committees have on numerous occasions been alert when documents or information have not been delivered, reminding the government of its responsibilities. As in the case of crisis management and future reports (see below), the committees can also establish various *ex ante* and *ex post* reporting mechanisms.

The legislative process normally begins with a government proposal for a new law. Following a preliminary dispatch debate in the plenary, the law proposal is sent to one of the permanent

committees that is designated as the committee responsible for producing a report on the matter, with other committee(s) submitting statements to the committee responsible for the issue. From 1980 to 1994, the committees wrote an average of 331 reports per year. Between 1995 and 2018 the corresponding number was 269. The Finance Committee and the Social Affairs and Health Committee produced the most reports. Regarding statements, until 1994, the committees wrote on average 69 per year. The corresponding figure for the period 1995 to 2018 was 306. In other words, after Finland joined the EU, the number of statements has quadrupled. In EU matters, the Grand Committee routinely bases its deliberations on statements from one or more permanent committees. Before EU membership, the Constitutional Law Committee delivered about 25 percent of the statements. After 1995, the distribution is much more even, but the Constitutional Law Committee nonetheless was still the most active committee in this regard.

Having heard experts, the committee conducts a general debate and tentatively decides on details. In the case of legislation, this includes going over a bill section by section. After a preliminary committee report has been produced, the final handling of the matter begins. As stated above, a vote must be held if the committee cannot reach unanimity and the minority can have its diverging views appended to the report. If the committee does not agree with the government's proposal, then it can rewrite bills, recommending to the plenary that the bill should be amended or even rejected. According to Helander and Pekonen (2007, pp. 64-69), the committees have not hesitated to recommend amendments to the proposals: 34 percent of proposals were amended in 1951, in 1960 the share was 30 percent and sank further to 20 (1972) and 17 percent (1983). In 1988, it grew to 28 percent and further to 44 percent (1993), and 48 percent (2001). Another study based on data from 2009 showed that committees recommended amendments to roughly half of the government proposals (Ahtonen et al., 2011).

As a general rule, the more complex the issue, the more likely the committees are to introduce changes to the bill proposals. Another factor that likely contributes to the increase in amended proposals is the

deficient quality of the draft bills, with committees needing to correct various legal problems involved in the proposals. Overall, most of the amendments have been fairly minor or technical matters. Committee reports may also include a recommendation: if accepted by the plenary, the recommendation normally asks or requires the government to look into a particular question or monitor the implementation of a law. The number of such recommendations declined considerably between 1995 and 2011 (Mattila, 2014, pp. 128-129). Normally, committee scrutiny takes one or two months, but urgent matters can be dealt with in just a few days. However, the handling of major legislative reforms can easily take many months or even years (see below). Once the committee report has been published, it is sent to the plenary session, where it is subjected to two readings. During the first, the content of the bill is decided section by section. In the second, the bill is either approved or rejected with simple majority, normally in line with the position of the committee responsible for the matter. At the end of the electoral period, bills are allowed to lapse, except for EU issues.

Finland has traditionally been categorized among countries in which opposition parties have a higher than average impact on government policy, not least through the committee system (Laver & Hunt, 1992; Strøm, 1990). More specifically, the now-defunct instrument of 'deferment rule' once empowered the opposition. According to this mechanism, one third of MPs (67/200) could postpone the final adoption of an ordinary law until the next election, with the proposal adopted if a majority in the new parliament supported it. In 1987, the period of postponement was shortened to the next annual parliamentary session, with the whole mechanism abolished in 1992. The deferment rule partially explained the propensity to form oversized coalitions and contributed to the practice of inclusive, consensual decision-making that reduced the gap between the cabinet and opposition (Mattila, 1997; Forestiere, 2008).

Given the abolition of the deferment rule and broader constitutional changes, it is not surprising that, since the early 1990s. Finland has become a strongly executive-dominated polity (Raunio & Wiberg, 2008). Nonetheless, as shown above, there is evidence that committees are not just rubber-stamping

the Government's proposals, but actually do alter the bill proposals. However, focusing only on legislative amendments may result in underestimating the policy influence of committees and parliaments (see Benton & Russell, 2013; Russell & Cowley, 2015). The remainder of this section thus uncovers further mechanisms through which committees exercise influence: the power of delay, ministerial hearings (EU affairs), refusal to be side-lined (foreign policy), and avoidance of myopia (the Committee for the Future).

Party disunity and the power to delay

According to the Parliament's Rules of Procedure, a 'Committee shall without delay deal with the matters referred thereto and, as the case may be, issue its report to the plenary session or its statement to another Committee.' But the meaning of 'without delay' is no simple matter; the more horizontal and salient the issue, the higher the number of experts giving testimony and the number of committees involved. Equally significant is party unity; as amending the Government's proposals requires the backing of a committee majority, opposition MPs need 'defectors' from cabinet parties to wield influence.

A recent illustration of this came during the 2015 to 2019 electoral term when Finland was governed by a centre-right coalition, led by Prime Minister Juha Sipilä, that brought together the Centre Party, the National Coalition, and the Finns Party (Blue Reform after the Finns split up in the summer of 2017). Previous cabinets had already failed to reorganize social and health services, and the issue became the clear top priority of the Sipilä Government. The planned reform would have brought about a larger role for the private sector in delivering such services (a key objective for the National Coalition) and the introduction of directly-elected regional councils (a key objective for the Centre, which wins most of its vote in the rural provinces). After considerable delay, the reform bill was finally introduced in the parliament in spring 2018, but by early 2019 the project had run into serious trouble in the Eduskunta, with also some backbench MPs of the governing parties voicing strong

criticism, indicating that they might not support the package. Finally, the project was buried in early March, with Sipilä immediately announcing the resignation of his government.

During the parliamentary processing of the bill, the governing parties were clearly agitated by the delays in the committees, with fingers pointing particularly at Krista Kiuru, the Social Democrat chair of the Social and Health Affairs Committee. Kiuru's committee continuously invited ever more evidence providers. The Constitutional Law Committee, chaired by Tuuli Lapintie from the Left Alliance, behaved in a similar fashion, seeking to hear more experts before producing its statement whilst expressing repeated concerns about the constitutionality of the reform bill. Kiuru and other opposition MPs may have been influential on the committees, but the delays would not have been possible without the (at least implicit) support of a sufficient number of MPs from the cabinet parties. A careful reading of the parliamentary standing orders and the 'Committee Manual' makes it clear that no committee chair can alone delay the processing of matters to the extent that was seen in connection with the social and health care reform package.

EU affairs and ministerial hearings

In the Eduskunta, the design of the EU scrutiny model was based on two features central to parliamentary culture: committees and strong information rights. In fact, the Eduskunta (2010, p. 14) itself has remarked that the scrutiny model was deliberately designed to resemble as much as possible the parliamentary procedures for processing domestic legislation. Regarding EU affairs, the only real difference is that the specialized committees report to the Grand Committee and not to the plenary. The goal was to guarantee the Eduskunta a position in EU decision-making that is as powerful as possible for any national legislature to maintain, with the parliament closely studying the work of existing scrutiny systems in national legislatures, particularly that of the Danish Folketing. When scholars have ranked the effectiveness of the various parliamentary EU scrutiny mechanisms, the

Eduskunta has without exception been categorized as one of the strongest parliaments (e.g. Karlas, 2012; Auel et al., 2015; Winzen, 2017).

The emphasis of the EU scrutiny model is on giving directions to Brussels-bound ministers in the Grand Committee or the Foreign Affairs Committee. The former coordinates parliamentary work in EU affairs while the latter is responsible for EU foreign and security policy and Treaty amendments. The Grand Committee is in a powerful position because it – and not the plenary – directs the government through specific mandates in EU affairs. The Grand Committee normally convenes on Wednesday and Friday afternoons. It has enjoyed high status in the Parliament since Finland joined the EU, and among its members are committee chairs and leaders of the party groups. The Eduskunta has explicitly and consistently stated that the main objective of the scrutiny system is the effective control of the Government. The main procedural rules – relatively proactive engagement, delegation of scrutiny to specialized committees, strong information rights enshrined in the constitution (primarily Sections 96 and 97), and confidential ministerial hearings in the Grand Committee – aim at facilitating government accountability. Inside the Eduskunta, European integration has further shifted the balance of power toward the committees that have a key role in scrutinizing EU matters. Roughly half of all matters handled by the committees are EU matters. European issues have therefore substantially increased the workload of most committees, which essentially means that MPs must be more selective in deciding which matters receive parliamentary attention.

The Grand Committee aims at unanimous decisions. The objective is to produce unanimous 'committee' opinions instead of decisions that pit the governing parties against the opposition.[viii] However, the Euro crisis at least temporarily changed the consensual mode of Grand Committee operations. Voting became more common, with the losing opposition minority adding its dissenting opinions to the committee statements. Much of this activity was explained by the strategies of The Finns Party.

The role of ministerial hearings deserves to be highlighted. When processing normal government bills, the other committees do not invite ministers to give evidence. The Grand Committee convenes, usually on Fridays, to hear ministers about Council or European Council meetings scheduled for the following week. In foreign and security policy matters, the ministerial hearings are in the Foreign Affairs Committee. The Grand Committee receives a report after the Council or the European Council meeting, and ministers must be also prepared to appear in the Grand Committee to explain any deviations from the given policy guidelines. In practice, the minister normally reports on the previous Brussels meeting when appearing in the Grand Committee. The PM has the obligation to inform the Grand Committee both beforehand and afterwards of European Council meetings, appearing before the committee the same way as other cabinet ministers do before Council meetings. If needed, the PM contacts the Grand Committee during the actual European Council meeting.

Ministerial hearings and active scrutiny of EU matters have arguably improved the overall dialogue between the government and the Eduskunta, thus strengthening parliamentary accountability also in domestic issues (Jääskinen, 2000, pp. 131-132). The hearings also force the ministers to study the issues more thoroughly than might otherwise be the case. Nonetheless, it must be stressed that the formulation of national EU policy is strongly government-driven, with the Eduskunta usually agreeing with the Government's position. It is thus realistic to argue that instead of genuinely directing national EU policy, the Eduskunta sets constraints for Government's European policy (Raunio, 2015; 2016b).

Foreign and security policy: refusing to be side-lined

Foreign policy in turn offers an example of how a parliamentary committee can establish a strong position in a policy area often seen to be an almost exclusive domain of the executive (Raunio & Wagner, 2017). The jurisdiction of the Foreign Affairs Committee covers general foreign and security policy, foreign trade, development cooperation, international treaties and organizations, peace-

keeping operations and the EU's evolving common foreign and security policy. A real turning point was the 1987 to 1991 electoral term, when under the chairmanship of Markus Aaltonen, the committee began asserting its role in foreign affairs, demanding more reports from the Government and issuing statements about them (until then the committee had merely discussed the reports), and hearing more experts. This proactive approach, which preceded the constitutional reforms that would a few years later give the Government and the Eduskunta real powers in foreign policy, led to several conflicts between President Mauno Koivisto and the Foreign Affairs Committee (Kallenautio, 2007, pp. 127-131; Meres-Wuori, 2014, pp. 135-150).

Under the new constitution, the Government is responsible for EU policy with foreign policy leadership shared between the president and the Government (Section 93). The Foreign Affairs Committee considers EU issues pertaining to foreign and security policy, whilst according to Section 97 it 'shall receive from the Government, upon request and when otherwise necessary, reports of matters pertaining to foreign and security policy.' Constitutionally regulated access to information is of great importance for the Foreign Affairs Committee, which has not only insisted on the Government fulfilling its reporting obligations but has also actively requested information from the cabinet. The formulation of the grand strategy document provides another important channel for *ex ante* parliamentary influence. Since 1995 it is titled the 'Government Security and Defence Policy Report' and published roughly every four years. It provides an overall framework for subsequent foreign and security policy decision-making. The first reports were produced in the 1970s and 1980s by parliamentary defence committees where parties were represented based on their share of Eduskunta seats. Since 1995, the Government has produced the reports, but the process is closely monitored by a parliamentary working group that brings together representatives from all Eduskunta parties. In the Eduskunta, the report is scrutinized carefully, with the Defence Committee submitting a statement to the Foreign Affairs Committee which produces a report on the issue for the plenary.

Committee involvement in crisis management operations is, in turn, based on a combination of *ex ante* and *ex post* instruments. The topic was particularly controversial in the 1990s, not least due to the changing security context and the associated move away from United Nations-authorized operations that had been a key dimension of national security policy. This period of politicization resulted in stronger participation rights for the Eduskunta and created a sense of 'ownership' among MPs toward crisis management. Not only does the government consult the Foreign Affairs Committee before each operation, the committee also receives information during the operations and *ex post*, for example, in the form of biannual crisis management overviews (Raunio, 2018).

Overall, the agenda of the Foreign Affairs Committee is diverse and the Eduskunta essentially subjects the government to similar scrutiny in foreign policy as in other policy areas. In fact, it might be more appropriate to talk about regular cooperation between the government and the Eduskunta, with the cabinet seeking *ex ante* support from the Foreign Affairs Committee for its positions (Raunio, 2016a).

Avoiding myopia

The final example of committee influence that is primarily indirect is the Committee for the Future. The decision to establish Government Reports on the Future and the Committee for the Future need to be understood in the context of the severe economic recession of the early 1990s following the collapse of the Soviet bloc. With the economic and political environment of Finland changing fast, there was broad support in the Eduskunta for the Committee for the Future. It t was first appointed as a temporary committee in 1993 and became a permanent one in 2000, but many thought that it was simply unnecessary, as surely existing standing committees could exercise long-term planning as part of their standard legislative scrutiny. Others rejected the idea of a permanent committee that had no legislative or budgetary duties (Arter, 2000).

The Committee for the Future defines its mission as generating dialogue with the government on major future problems and opportunities. Its primary task is to prepare the response of the Eduskunta to the Government's Report on the Future, which is presented once per electoral term. It also issues statements to the other committees about the national budget, the annual government report, and various 'future' matters when requested. Furthermore, it discusses future trends and related issues, analyses research and methodology focused on the future, and serves as the parliamentary body responsible for assessing technological development and its societal consequences. However, as the Committee for the Future proclaims on its website,

> 'the most important efforts are devoted to [the] Committee's own issues, its own projects. The power [to] decide its own agenda is one of the pillars of the strength of the Committee. 17 parliamentarians themselves stake out policy lines for the future. The time perspective is long and the scale of issues broad.'[ix]

Between 2000 and 2018, the committee produced 76 publications on a broad range of topics from gene- and nanotechnology to municipal democracy. The reports are usually extensive and thorough, exceeding 50, sometimes even 100 pages. The longer reports, often commissioned from external experts, are published as books, and are often praised for their quality.[x]

The Committee for the Future does not scrutinize legislative proposals and budgets, thus operating largely outside of the ordinary parliamentary process. Its working practices are also different. It emphasises openness and inclusiveness: MPs can choose their projects, and depth is added to the preparation processes through open seminars, workshops, social media, and online discussions. Another distinct characteristic is a commitment to non-partisan, deliberative discussion. Moreover, its work is characterized by slowness and a liberal attitude toward schedules, as it does not need to follow the hectic pace of legislative processes. Hence, the Committee for the Future operates more like an academic seminar than a parliamentary committee. In addition to expert hearings, which are

conducted in a more scientific style compared to standard committee hearings, the Committee for the Future has made explicit use of future research methods like scenario building.

The Committee for the Future can arguably be considered a moderate success. It has consolidated its position within the Eduskunta, and has also established a close and active relationship with the Prime Minister's Office, which is responsible for the national foresight system. The exact influence of the Committee for the Future is difficult to measure. On the one hand, it remains a 'harmless sideshow' quite detached from ordinary Eduskunta work, but, on the other hand, members can use their future-related knowledge in other committees and in their party groups. There is also evidence that the Committee for the Future has occasionally succeeded in influencing government programmes (Arter, 2000; Boston, 2017). Overall, the committee appears to be politically stronger *vis-à-vis* the government than inside the Eduskunta (Koskimaa & Raunio, 2020).

Concluding discussion

This chapter has examined committees in the Finnish Eduskunta. The committee system has gradually evolved over the decades, and the working practices and 'committee cultures' have become firmly institutionalized. This makes it easier for MPs to switch between committees and, also, facilitates cooperation between individual committees. Finnish MPs seem largely satisfied with how committees function, and there have been essentially no demands for any major reforms.

Parliamentarians also appreciate the closed committee environment, which contributes to constructive bargaining between political parties, including between government and opposition parties. Traditionally, the Nordic countries have been noted for their inter-party cooperation across the ideological spectrum, and parliamentary committees provide an important forum for such cooperation. Finnish parliamentary culture does not appear conducive to embracing more transparency or participatory channels of influence. The Eduskunta focuses very much on controlling the government and specifically on scrutiny of government bills, not on 'reaching out' to citizens.

There is a strong attachment to a traditional mode of representative democracy, and while the Citizens' Initiative might bring about a more participatory legislative culture in the long run, there persists a lukewarm attitude toward between-the-elections democratic innovations (Arter, 2012; Seo, 2017). This analysis has also shown that committee hearings are mainly dominated by 'usual suspects' at the expense of ordinary citizens and socially marginalized groups. Hence, committees could expand the scope of hearings by involving more diverse social sectors and enhancing engagement with the public (Seo, 2017). Expert hearings could be held open to the public as a rule unless there is special reason for secrecy. Moreover, mechanisms like online consultation or 'E-Parliament' could be designed for citizens to submit their opinions to the committees.

Returning to the question found in the introductory chapter of this volume, are the Eduskunta committees the engine room or more like decoration? The Finnish polity is strongly government-driven. The cabinets are typically oversized coalitions that enjoy broad majorities in the Eduskunta. Unless party discipline breaks down, this essentially ensures that government bills are approved by committees with or without amendments. When government proposals encounter difficulties in the Eduskunta, the issues are normally solved inside or between party groups, seldom in actual committee meetings. Yet, this chapter has argued that focusing on amendments or other visible measures is not sufficient for capturing how committees or legislatures may influence government behaviour or national politics. Through ministerial hearings, the Grand Committee can impact the Government's bargaining stances in EU institutions, while the Foreign Affairs Committee has through proactive measures managed to carve out an influential position for itself in Finland's external relations. Both EU affairs and foreign policy also illustrate the importance of *ex ante* and *ex post* reporting requirements. The Committee for the Future, in turn, has the potential to shape long-term developments in Finland. The exact influence of Eduskunta committees is difficult to estimate, but clearly any study of a legislature's policy influence must consider the variety of channels through which committees shape politics.

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[i] The Constitution of Finland, 11 June, 1999 (731/1999, amendments up to 817/2018 included). An English translation is available at http://www.finlex.fi/en/laki/kaannokset/1999/en19990731.pdf.
[ii] Much of the information about committee and parliamentary procedures is from two sources: the Parliament's Rules of Procedure (*Eduskunnan työjärjestys* 17.12.1999/40 v. 2000); and the nearly 200-hundred page 'Committee Manual' which contains detailed rules about committees (*Valiokuntaopas 2015*, Eduskunnan kanslian julkaisu 1/2015).
[iii] Section 35 of the Constitution specifies that the 'Grand Committee shall have twenty-five members. The Constitutional Law Committee, the Foreign Affairs Committee and the Finance Committee shall have at least seventeen members each. The other standing Committees shall have at least eleven members each. In addition, each Committee shall have the necessary number of alternate members.'
[iv] Data released by the Eduskunta. In the last parliamentary session of the electoral term (such as 2014), the number of governmental proposals is higher which increases the number of expert consultations.
[v] Tuomas Peltomäki, "HS-selvitys: Heitä eduskunta kuuntelee", Helsingin Sanomat, 28.4.2013.
vi Teija Sutinen, "Eduskunta tuhoaa päivittäin tiedot talossa käyneistä vierailijoista – hävittäminen alkoi, kun oikeus määräsi tiedot julkisiksi", Helsingin Sanomat, 12.9.2017.
[vii] On the motion of a committee, the Speaker's Council may decide that information received by the committee is debated in the plenary. However, should that happen, the plenary will not make a formal decision on the matter.
[viii] These features caught the attention of a visiting delegation from the House of Commons. According to Matthew Kirk, the UK ambassador to Finland, the visitors were particularly struck by the strong consensus among Finnish politicians, the wide cooperation between the government and the opposition on EU affairs and that in an otherwise transparent society such a large amount of parliamentary work was conducted behind closed doors. Annamari Sipilä, "Suomen eduskunta antoi briteille mallia EU-asioiden käsittelyssä", Helsingin Sanomat 23.3.2005.
[ix] https://www.eduskunta.fi/EN/valiokunnat/tulevaisuusvaliokunta/Pages/default.aspx.
[x] Personal interviews with MPs (Koskimaa & Raunio, 2020).