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DEMOCRACY AND ITS FUTURE

The birth of Finland's national parliament, the Eduskunta, a century ago was a landmark event in world history. Under a law passed by the old Diet of Four Estates and promulgated by Czar Nicholas II in 1906, elections in which both men and women could vote and also stand as candidates took place the following year; the only restriction was that they had to be at least 24 years of age. Nineteen women, the first female parliamentarians in history, were elected to the Eduskunta. The size of the electorate increased seven-fold compared with the days of the Diet.

Thus the general election in March next year will be a jubilee event. It gives us a very good reason to ponder the state and future of our own democracy, and also reflect on how democracy is advancing and the various forms that it takes in our world.

To mark its centenary, the Eduskunta has been trying in a variety of ways to promote a discussion on the theme of democracy. One example of this is the arrangement together with the University of Helsinki of a series of *Studia generalia* lectures. The Committee for the Future published a book titled "Democracy and Futures" this summer. In it, academic experts from several parts of the world outline scenarios for the future of democracy.

In the present history-less time, it must be emphasised that the future of democracy cannot be successfully built without knowing its roots and the entire process that has led to modern western democracy. It is especially important to maintain an awareness of how seriously democracy has been threatened and how fragile it still is in many places.

The birth of Finnish democracy is associated with a process that began in ancient Greece. Equality of free citizens, open discussion and acceptance of individuality are still elements of the foundation of our culture today. The Senate was an important actor during the Roman era, even though it was strongly oligarchic. Features inherited from the days of Antiquity can still be discerned in the way the Italian parliament works today. The continuity of our culture is astonishing.

The Magna Carta in the 13th century, the Nordic *tings* in the Middle Ages, England's Glorious Revolution in the late 17th century, the Constitution of the United States, the French Revolution and Sweden's Act of Union and Security in the latter half of the 18th century were milestones of democracy.

It was a decisive event for the development of Finland when this small nation became a part of the Swedish realm in the 12th and 13th centuries. That gave the Finns the Roman-Catholic religion and the western European culture associated with it, in addition to Sweden's relatively progressive legislation and economic system, which included free peasants and gradual liberalisation. The alternative would have been feudalism under either the Teutonic Knights or the Czar of Russia. Thus Finland avoided drifting into the eastern European cultural sphere, a place of autocracy and

authoritarianism where the building of democracy is still only limping along in the 21st century.

Finnish democracy needed both external and internal preconditions to be met before it could come into being. As a part of the Russian Empire from 1809 onwards, Finland enjoyed autonomy and had its own legislative assembly, the Diet. The nation was born when the Finns exploited this opportunity to the full. National institutions, such as our own currency and languages, established their positions. The revolution in Russia in 1905 created favourable conditions for parliamentary reform in Finland. Finland gained independence when Russia was in a state of weakness following the 1917 revolution.

The most important internal preconditions were the retention of Swedish legislation as the law of autonomous Finland and the development of popular education and civil society as the foundation for a political culture. The Reformation opened the way for the emergence of Finnish as a literary language, which in principle brought book learning within everyone's reach. The promulgation in 1866 of a decree on elementary schools was a major turning point in popular education. Later, when a statutory obligation to establish elementary schools was imposed on municipalities, children from all strata of the population, boys and girls, were able to attend school. Finland's first modern democratic institution, the village meeting, emerged in the late 19th century. At it, all residents could have a say in choosing the members of the board of the elementary school and, if they wished, could themselves seek election to the board.

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By the time the Eduskunta was created, the civil society infrastructure that is essential for democracy was already largely in place. Elementary schools ensured that people could read and write. Cooperatives meant a strengthening of independent action. Workers' associations founded study clubs and libraries and engaged in a great diversity of cultural activities. They, along with youth clubs, were the cultural movement of their era. By 1906, the present political mass movements, political parties or their precursors, were already in existence; examples include the Social Democratic Party and the Agrarian League (now the Centre Party).

The Eduskunta's work was badly disrupted when the Czar refused his assent for laws that it had passed or dissolved it, as happened on several occasions. The power of the Eduskunta was also being gnawed at from within, because there was a perception in the most conservative circles that the whole reform went too far. However, the biggest setback for efforts to strengthen democracy was the fate of the local-government electoral reform enacted by the Eduskunta in 1907: its promulgation was first delayed in the Russian bureaucracy and then refused by the Czar in 1911.

Finland drifted into civil war because democracy did not work. Large segments of the population were disappointed at the Eduskunta's impotence, and even its marginalisation in 1917. Hunger and hardship inflamed the situation on the local level, where power of decision in things like the food supply rested with a small minority. A situation of this kind was fertile ground for radicalisation. Many researchers believe that the

implementation of a reform of municipal democracy would have prevented the outbreak of civil war, because it would have taught people how to cooperate and share responsibility on the local level.

When the form of government that an independent Finland should have been decided, the battle of spirits that had begun in the days of the parliamentary reform continued. The conservatives lost when monarchy was rejected. The major popular movements, the Social Democrats and the Agrarian League, supported a republic. A relatively strong presidency institution meant a concession to the conservatives. Indeed, Maurice Duverger has characterised the Finnish form of government as “semi-presidential” in the manner of the Weimar Republic and the France of 1958.

Nationalism and the imperialism associated with it led to the First World War. The totalitarianism that emerged in Europe after that conflict threatened democracy everywhere. Authoritarian systems were put in place in Germany as well as in eastern and southern Europe. In the latter half of the 1930s Finland was one of the minority of European countries where democracy remained unsullied. The great majority of the people, all of the traditional political movements, took the side of democracy.

Democracy was saved from its enemies in the 1930s. In the Second World War, democracy saved Finland. The nation had regained its unity, and a will to defend itself as well as a wise policy saved the country from occupation. Less attention has been paid to the fact that democracy had to be saved once again in the turbulent conditions after the war. If the Social Democrats had agreed to an electoral pact with the Communists or given way to the

Communists in the struggle for control of the trade union movement, Finland would have gone the way of Czechoslovakia.

During the Cold War, Finland was able, with the aid of her policy of neutrality, to integrate consistently into the cooperative structures of western democracies and market economies. However, the political system remained characteristically president-centred until the 1980s. Management of relations with the Soviet Union was concentrated in the hands of the President in an un-parliamentary manner and on this basis he could decisively influence the composition of governments. On the other hand, there was a broad consensus on foreign policy and the course of the country's development was determined in parliamentary and municipal elections.

The election of Mauno Koivisto as President of the Republic meant a major change in domestic politics. The Social Democrats no longer needed the People's Democrats to be able to participate in government. What is even more significant is that an era of stability began in domestic politics: all governments since 1983 have sat for a full parliamentary term.

Discrimination ended. Since then, all parliamentary parties have taken their turns in governing coalitions.

In the 1990s a need was perceived to change the system of supreme decision making from a presidential to a clearly Eduskunta-centred one. Already when Finland joined the EU, responsibility for the direction of Union policy was assigned to the Government, which meant a considerable strengthening of the Prime Minister's position. In an extensive revision of the Constitution

that came into force in 2000, more of the President's powers were transferred to the Eduskunta; the most important of these related to appointing the Prime Minister and Government.

The President retained responsibility for the conduct of foreign policy, but must do so jointly with the Government. This system has worked well, but since the President is directly elected it contains the risk of a potential conflict. A populist President who intervened in domestic policy issues and tried to conduct a foreign policy line of his or her own could cause a lot of confusion, but would ultimately have to yield to the will of the Government and the Eduskunta.

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The Constitution of Finland has functioned well. Like Unto Hämäläinen we can ask: "In how many European states has a democratic form of government been preserved uninterruptedly for so long?" This may be due also to the fact that the Constitution has been revised to correspond to changed circumstances. In this sense, our Constitution is evolutionary, developing. The way in which it functions must continue to be the focus of critical examination.

Especially EU membership has brought new needs for change and introduced new features into our system. We have been confronted with the challenge of developing European democracy and also with the question of democracy in the global community.

In the French and Dutch referendums on the Constitutional Treaty for Europe, democracy can be said to have worked. The institution of referendum can be seen to have gained strength insofar as, for example, France has decided to submit the accession treaties of all future Member States of the EU to referendums. This is not at all a matter of developing the political system, but rather of an inescapable domestic policy solution. The proposal on which a position had to be adopted in the referendums mentioned would, if adopted, have meant a step towards greater democracy in the EU's decision-making system. In practice, the French and Dutch voters were thinking more of domestic policy issues like unemployment and immigration.

Whatever the fate of the EU Constitutional Treaty turns out to be, the reforms provided for in its first part will have to be implemented for the Union to be able to function. Any attempts by the big countries to grab more power for themselves than has already been negotiated must absolutely be rejected. The problems in the EU lie, on the one hand, in everyday matters and, on the other, in failings in the way the parliamentary system functions in many of the Member States. The EU must function more efficiently in matters that concern people, such as energy policy. The position of national parliaments in decision making in relation to EU policy must be strengthened.

In Finland's EU-related decision making, parliamentary oversight of the Government's actions is implemented better than in any other Member State. The Grand Committee takes part in decision making already at the legislative drafting stage. The special committees make submissions to the

Grand Committee on matters belonging to their respective fields of competence before the Eduskunta's position takes shape. Thus our parliament participates through the Government in decision making in the EU's legislative body, the Council.

This democratic channel for influence can in no way be compensated for by opening some kind of direct road for national parliaments to participate in decision making alongside the EU institutions – the European Parliament, the Council of Member States, the Commission or the Court of Justice. Something like that would only tend to add even further complexity to the EU's institutional structure. Ostensible demands in several Member States for a strengthening of the position of national parliaments are actually an attempt to draw attention away from these parliaments' weakness relative to the government. In some cases, indeed, we can ask whether even all members of the government are in a position to influence their country's EU policy.

Through EU membership and deepening integration Finland is surrendering a part of her sovereignty, her power of decision, to the supranational level. In return, however, Finnish voters get the opportunity to influence many matters, such as the development of the internal market, in relation to which they would have far less say from outside the EU. This applies also to global issues. Through the EU's common trade and climate policy, democracy is realised for the Finns on the global level. Here too we can ask, in the same way as in my earlier examination of EU decision making, in how many countries of the world is the situation as good as it is in Finland?

As an EU member, Finland has to adopt a position on the state of democracy in other Member States, those aspiring to accede and other neighbouring countries. As a member of the UN, the EU, the OSCE and the Council of Europe, we monitor democracy globally.

The new Member States are still struggling with the negative effects of the communist system. Surprisingly little attention has been paid to the way municipal democracy atrophied under communism. A lack of responsibility on the local level weakened the prerequisites for the emergence of a civil society. Uncertainty concerning the separation of powers between the president and the parliament remains an aspect of political systems in many countries. Bickering and powerful antagonism are characteristic traits of political cultures.

The Union is in a constant dialogue with its neighbours on democracy and the human rights issues that are inseparably linked to it. The focus of our greatest interest is Russia, where a presidential election is approaching.

Russia is implementing “sovereign democracy”. In other words, it wants to define democracy in a way that suits the needs of those in power. From a western perception, the poor opportunities for action that are available to the opposition, a concentration of the media in the hands of those close to the wielders of power and the participation of decision makers in the operations of state-owned companies are features that ill suit democracy in the way that it is understood in the EU.

The redistribution of state assets that happened in conjunction with and after the collapse of the Soviet Union strongly influences the Russian political system. The struggle for power in the ownership of energy companies and other state-owned enterprises may intensify in Russia in the near future, at least behind the scenes. The dominant position of one resource has also in many other countries tended to concentrate power in the hands of the few. Diversification of the economy is one of the essential prerequisites for democratic development.

Despite everything, the development in Russia as well as in many other countries belongs to the great triumphal march of democracy in recent decades. Since 1972, 67 countries have made the changeover from dictatorship to democracy. India is the world's biggest democracy. South Africa's democracy gives hope for the whole continent. In South America, Chile's democracy is showing the way to stability and development. However, the crisis in the Middle East and the collision of cultures associated with it weaken optimism about the triumphal march of democracy. Efforts to export democracy by means of power politics have encountered major difficulties.

Seen from the perspective of the EU, the Community's enlargement offers the most powerful instrument for helping democracy to take root in our immediate environment. The membership perspective can in many cases be such a powerful enticement that the political system becomes democratic. Turkey is a good example of a country where the rule of law and human rights are being strengthened so that this country, which builds democracy in a traditional way, can become a member.

Exporting democracy with the aid of military force does not suit the EU. The use of force can upset the ethnic and religious balance within the country that is the target of its use and destroy the achievements of the old system in a fateful manner, as has happened in Iraq. However, depending on the situation, there must be a willingness to use force to defend democracy.

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Finnish democracy is today one of the strongest in the world. Hardly anywhere else does a combination of state and municipal democracy work so well. However, changes in the international environment, circumstances of life and social structures such as the media environment pose a big challenge to the development of democracy.

A tradition of consensus, which came into being under foreign policy pressures and was reinforced during the economic crisis in the 1990s, has been a great strength for Finland. With its aid we have emerged from crisis and risen to the top of the world table according to nearly every criterion from competitiveness to sustainable development. Alongside foreign and EU policy, there is a broad consensus in the Eduskunta on the welfare state and the main outlines of foreign policy. On the other hand, it can be asked whether we have a real parliamentary opposition. As recently as a few years ago, there was talk in Sweden of what they called a "systemskifte" or system shift. In Swedish elections, however, the official opposition carved out a profile for itself by going as close as possible to the government's policy.

In Finland, the opposition's task of challenging the prevailing consensus has been left to think tanks that operate outside the Eduskunta, such as the Finnish Business and Policy Forum EVA. They cannot be blamed for this; on the contrary, they perform an important task in seeking solutions in the face of great challenges like globalisation and aging of the population.

In Finland we should support the parties in their own efforts to develop alternative solutions and debate concerning them in think tanks or comparable bodies close to themselves. The Social Democrats are working towards this end in the Kalevi Sorsa Foundation. We should try to involve citizens, especially the young, in these discussions, using the Internet among other means.

A parliamentary and municipal political system founded on interaction between majority and minority must not, however, be replaced by one in which various minorities are combined by means of Internet polls on specific issues, as has been proposed. Only the present system, based on the majority that emerges through elections, makes it possible to arrive at major strategic solutions as part of a consistent long-term policy. Only in this way can decision makers assume responsibility and feel that they are doing so even in difficult situations.

The present system gives voters the opportunity to wield influence on the EU level as well as nationally and locally. When the municipal and services structure is being reshaped, this opportunity for voters to have an input must not be weakened by means of complex intermunicipal agreements providing

for a variety of bodies that increase the indirectness of decision making and blur the division of powers and responsibilities.

Democracy means having a stake. Unemployment and marginalisation of young people reduce people's sense of having one. We must make considerably greater inputs than is now the case into education and training for young people who have just completed the world's best comprehensive school and preventing their marginalisation. The latest group threatened with marginalisation in democracy are immigrants. They should be encouraged to take part in the activities of NGOs and parties.

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When he was examining Machiavelli's thinking, Bertrand Russell made the following appraisal of democracy:

“What is ultimately involved is power ... Of course, power often depends on opinions and opinion on propaganda; it is also true that in propaganda it is an advantage if you seem more virtuous than your opponent, and that one way to seem virtuous is to be virtuous. That is why it can sometimes happen that the victor is the party that has more of what the public sees considers virtuous”.

All, including the media, must bear responsibility for ensuring that cynical image-building does not become the main thing. I believe that the most important motive driving those that seek power in Finnish democracy is the common good, of both the Finns and humankind as a whole.

