



**ECPRD seminar "Parliamentary History and its Communication to the Public"**

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Library of the Finnish Parliament

Veteran Members of Parliament Oral History Archive

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**Oral Histories of the Finnish Veteran Members of Parliament**

First of all, I would argue that there prevails a strong consciousness of history at the Finnish parliament.

It is based on the state oriented legal tradition of the Finnish nationalism of the 1800-century.

Since then history has served as a natural resource for the Finnish nation building.

As a part of this process, the professional historians have served the Finnish nation state by writing histories of the Finnish parliamentary institutions.

I begin by presenting you two examples: **SLIDE 1**

**Finnish parliamentary history projects since the Second WW**

The major history projects at the Finnish parliament have often been connected to historical anniversaries of the Finnish democracy.

In 1963, there was a 100-years anniversary for the year 1863 when the representatives of the estates of the Finnish Grand Duchy were invited to a Diet by the Russian Tsar.

The anniversary was honoured with the first history book series on the Finnish institution of representative democracy. The project lasted 25 years. The last one of the 12 volumes, written by 23 professional historians, was finished in 1982.

In 2007, we celebrated the Parliaments Centennial, 100-years' anniversary of universal and equal suffrage and a unicameral parliament in Finland since 1907.

The great jubilee year consisted of official celebrations, for example parliamentary ceremonial sessions, academic seminars, cultural program including a new opera at the Savonlinna Opera Festival.

In addition, we had three Centennial exhibitions:

- *Portraits and photos of the Speakers*
- *Buildings and Facilities Used by the Parliament*
- Travelling exhibition: *Parliament's Role and Significance in Finnish Society* that was circulated worldwide via the Finnish embassies in more than 50 countries

The jubilee year also produced Parliament of Finland Centennial, a history series with 12 volumes by 41 authors. For this history project, the Centre of Parliamentary Studies was founded at the University of Turku.

The main theme of this presentation is our collection of Ex-MPs' oral history. Contrary to the history projects I mentioned, its start had nothing to do with the historical anniversaries. **SLIDE 2**

### **Investment in oral history at the parliament 1988-**

Oral history became an academic trend since the late 1970s. Until then, the oral testimonies had been underestimated as unreliable sources for serious academic research. The interviewees tend to keep quiet, forget or lie about the things they are asked, either consciously or unconsciously.

On the other hand, many interviewees remember historical moments and issues that cannot be covered with other means but asking them. The oral historians proclaimed that oral sources can produce very useful knowledge if they are taken seriously.

The debate on the value of oral history reached Finland in the early 1980s. It became clear that there existed only a few oral history collections and none of them was made of the political decision-makers. Rather, oral history has been a tradition for various oppressed minorities (workers, women) to maintain their own historical consciousness.

The politicians do not need oral history for their identification since their presence in traditional political history has been strong. Instead, the motives for collecting oral history on the Finnish Ex-MPs have been formulated as follows:

- national duty for saving the Ex-MPs' oral history for scientific parliamentary research and for the future generations
- collection of the MPs' "tacit knowledge" that cannot be covered with other methods
- mapping of the Ex-MPs' own interpretations of their roles as decision-makers in the Finnish parliamentary system

These arguments were convincing enough for launching of a veteran MPs' oral history pre-project in the mid-1980s at the Finnish Library of Parliament. The results of the pre-project were evaluated positively by

academic historians, which guaranteed state budget resources for a longer-lasting project with one full-time researcher since 1988. This effort has now been going on for 23 years and produced 330 interviews whose average length is almost six hours. Every interview is carefully transcribed: nowadays the archive consists of over 50 000 written pages.

In my opinion, our Veteran MPs' Oral History Archive is unique in its volume, continuity, and systematic of the themes of the interviews. To put it simply, it is something to be proud of. **SLIDE 3**

### **Characteristics of the Ex-MPs' oral history interviews**

A veteran MP is, by our definition, any MP that has left the Parliament of Finland, no matter how short or long his or hers career as a MP has been.

Practically, our target group consists of

- retired, often aged Ex-parliamentarians
- Ex-MPs that could not renew their mandate at the parliamentary elections
- Ex-MPs that decided to leave the parliament for new challenges

The main criteria for the selection of the interviewees has been

- the amount of the years at the parliament
- special significance of the MP's political career (member of government, MEP, public visibility etc.)
- the Ex-MP's older / health

Since our interview archive is supposed to reflect the relative strength of the political parties at the Finnish parliament, political as well as regional representativeness has been taken care of. The share of the interviewed female MPs, (27 %), illustrates rather well the growing significance of women at the Finnish parliament. Today, 85 out of 200 (43 %) of the Finnish MPs are females.

Methodologically, our approach differs fundamentally from the standard elite interviews of the sitting MPs. Instead of collecting data to the questionnaires, the interviewers attempt to discuss equally about the given themes in a confidential atmosphere. The ex-MP's memory is stimulated with open-ended questions. The success of the interview depends on confidence and interaction between interviewer and the interviewee.

Every interview of a veteran MP differs from each other since oral history emphasizes the interviewees' personal view, experiences and values. The interpretations are respected as such, regardless of their relation to so called historical truth.

All in all, we have still a lot of work to be done: there are now 350 Finnish ex-parliamentarians still alive that should be interviewed.

The interviews of the Finnish ex-MP are based on a common theme schedule that is posted in advance to the interviewees, which has improved the results of the interviews. Our interview approach could be described as semi-structured life history interview with the focus on the Ex-parliamentarian's views on his or hers political career. Though we try to cover the entire life history from the childhood to the present most of the interview themes discuss the Ex-MP's years at the parliament.

### **Content of the veteran MP's interview**

The interview schedule consists of the following main themes: **SLIDE 4**

- Social and political background of the interviewee
- About becoming a MP: campaigns and elections
- MP's work and everyday life at the parliament
  - o Parliamentary committees
  - o Plenary sessions
  - o Parliamentary groups
  - o Media and politics
- mapping of the content of politics and political activities of the MP's career
- depending on the interviewed person: (MP as minister) (Member of European Parliament)
- Finnish democracy, parliamentarism and exercise of power
- finally, Ex-MP's activities after the parliamentarian's career

The veteran MPs' interviews have produced valuable tacit knowledge, for example, about the MPs' everyday life, their personal networks across the political groupings and about the unofficial practices at the parliament. Typically for the Finns of a certain period, many political compromises were for example negotiated among the male MPs at the parliament's sauna. **SLIDE 5**

### **Restrictions and usability of the OH collection**

The interviews of the Veteran MPs' Oral History Archive are not public. Every user has to apply for permission that is approved by the Director of the Library of Parliament. In addition, every interviewee has a right to set personal limitations for the usability of his or hers own interview. Throughout the years, less than 10 % have used this right.

The strict access policy of our archive has been explained by maintenance of confidence of the MPs. First and foremost, they have been worried about the possible abuse of the interviews by the media. That is why the maintainers of the collection have kept low profile about the archive. Until the autumn 2010, we did not have any information about the collection at the public Internet-sites of the Library of Parliament.

As a result, our Oral History Collection has communicated with the public through various scientific publications. Usually, the interviews have served as complementary source material for biographies of politicians or for the histories of political parties. The writers of the History of Parliament Centennial were encouraged to use the Ex-MPs' interviews. We received some articles that covered social networks and everyday life of the MPs and some biographical chapters. Much more could and should have been done. A copy of the transcribed interview is nowadays given to every interviewee. Some of them have used their copy as a draft for their personal memoirs.

To put it shortly, our interview archive has lots of unused potential. Once the old interviews that have until 2009 been recorded into C-cassettes will be digitalized possibilities for their reuse in e-formed applications will multiply. Despite the restrictions, my aim as the researcher responsible for the archive is now to make it more well-known and increase its use as research material. **SLIDE 6**

### **Mapping and sharing of the oral history knowledge of the European parliaments**

As I already mentioned, one reason for starting to collect the Veteran MPs OH Archive was the national duty to save the voice of the former MPs to the future generations.

Taken the reasoning as such, why has our Finnish parliament been an exception among the other European parliaments to highlight oral history this much?

To my knowledge, correct me if I'm wrong, there has been various oral history projects going on at the European parliaments, but no one of them has lasted over 20 years without major breaks. The value of our collection grows the longer we are able to maintain it and produce comparable oral history material.

I would be glad to hear about the oral history experiences at your national parliaments. Our interview materials are naturally available for scientific comparison for those of you who can master our peculiar languages, Finnish or Swedish.

### **SLIDE 7**

Thank you for your attention!