PARLIAMENT
of
FINLAND
Dear Reader

Every MP has a vision of a better Finland. Parliamentary work involves coordinating these two hundred visions.

It is up to voters to evaluate the end results of work—whether Parliament has enacted good or bad legislation or appropriated budget funds for the right purposes. All of Parliament’s decisions are public and can be viewed on Parliament’s website.

By voting citizens decide who will climb the steps of Parliament after an election. I hope this brochure will give you a better idea of what we do and why Parliament exists.

Welcome to the Finnish parliament!

EERO HEINÄLUOMA,
Speaker of Parliament

After the 2011 election Eero Heinäluoma (middle) was elected Speaker of Parliament, Pekka Ravi (right) First Deputy Speaker and Anssi Joutsenlahti (left) Second Deputy Speaker.
Every citizen can participate in public affairs by voting. Parliamentary elections are direct, proportional and secret. Every citizen who has reached the age of 18 by election day has the right to vote. Each citizen who is eligible has one vote.

Elections are direct: voters cast their votes for the candidate of their choice. Elections are also secret, which means that only the voter knows which candidate he/she has voted for. To ensure secrecy a citizen must vote in person under the supervision of an election official. The voter fills in a ballot in a voting booth, folds it and drops it in a ballot box anonymously.

Finland is a republic, in which power is vested in the people. Every four years Finns elect Parliament, which decides on national matters.

Parliament enacts legislation and approves the state budget. It also elects the Prime Minister and oversees the Government. In addition Parliament approves major international agreements that are binding on Finland and influences European Union affairs.

Parliament decides on legislation, the budget, international agreements and confidence in the Government in plenary sessions, which are open to the public.

Power is vested in the people
The plenary session—legislation and political debate

The plenary session is the most visible aspect of Parliament’s work. During each term Parliament meets in plenary session four times a week, from Tuesday to Friday.

Parliament’s most important task, enacting legislation, takes place in plenary session. Parliament enacts new legislation or amends existing legislation on the basis of a Government proposal or a Member’s motion. Most legislation results from Government proposals, which average about 250 a year. It generally takes 2–4 months to consider a proposal, but major legislative projects can take years.

The handling of proposed legislation begins with a preliminary debate in plenary session. The purpose of this debate is to provide a basis for work in the committee to which the proposal is referred. After committee handling a proposal returns to the plenary session, where it is given two readings. In the first reading the content of the bill is decided section by section. In the second reading the bill is either approved or rejected. Once it has been ratified by the President of the Republic, an Act is published in the Statutes of Finland.

The plenary session is also an arena for timely political debate. In many people’s opinion the most important plenary session is Question Time on Thursdays, when ministers must answer MPs’ oral questions. The public is welcome to watch plenary sessions. There are also live webcasts of sessions on Parliament’s website.

The legislative process.

MPs stand up at the beginning of the weekly Question Time to signal that they wish to pose a question to one of the government ministers present.
Visitors to Parliament often wonder where all the MPs are, when a plenary session is under way and half the seats in the hall are empty. The answer has to do with the different nature of sessions. Although all of them are plenary sessions, in practice some are reserved for decision-making and others for speaking.

When it is time to make decisions everyone is present unless they are unable to attend because of a work-related trip, illness or some other valid reason.

Speaking sessions are an essential part of democracy, since MPs have been elected to represent the people and its opinions. In Finland MPs have the right to speak about a matter that is being discussed for as long and as many times as they wish. Another part of democracy is that MPs are not obliged to sit and listen to everyone else’s opinions.

All the speeches that are given in plenary session along with the results of all votes are included in the records of plenary sessions. These are available on Parliament’s website about two hours after the end of each plenary session.
A committee is the most important place where an MP can influence matters, since all parliamentary decisions are prepared by committees.

After the preliminary debate in plenary session, a Government proposal is referred to the appropriate committee. For example, legislation concerning schools is referred to the Education and Culture Committee and tax laws to the Finance Committee. A committee can also issue a statement to another committee.

In committees MPs hear experts’ views concerning what impacts legislation is likely to have. Experts can be civil servants at ministries or agencies, university researchers or representatives of non-governmental organizations or interest groups, for example.

By asking questions MPs can get a thorough understanding of the content of legislation. Most MPs work in two different committees.

On the basis of expert hearings and debate a committee forms an opinion on a Government proposal. In its report the committee can recommend the approval of a proposal as it is, amendments to the proposal or its rejection.

After the committee stage a proposal goes back to the plenary session. MPs can propose amendments, but most often the committee report is adopted as Parliament’s decision.

Parliament has 15 permanent special committees plus the Grand Committee, which focuses on EU matters. The composition of a committee reflects the

Every MP deals with EU affairs

Compared with many other member states, in Finland Parliament plays a strong role in deciding on European Union affairs. The Grand Committee serves as Parliament’s EU committee. Its most important task is to ensure Parliament’s influence and parliamentary oversight in EU decision-making. In the case of the European Union’s common foreign and security policy, Parliament’s views are expressed by the Foreign Affairs Committee.

The special committees consider EU affairs that fall within their task area and issue statements on them to the Grand Committee. Every MP deals with EU affairs through committee work.

Each MP is member of two committees, on average. The Speaker, deputy speakers and MPs who act as government ministers are not appointed committee members. The picture is from the meeting of the Agriculture and Forestry Committee.
relative strengths of different parliamentary groups. Most parliamentary committees have 17 members and 9 deputy members. Exceptions are the Finance Committee with 21 members and 19 deputy members, the Audit Committee with 11 members and 6 deputy members, and the Grand Committee with 25 members and 13 deputy members. Committee seats are divided according to parliamentary groups’ relative strengths.

Committee agendas and records of committee meetings are available on Parliament’s website and can be used to follow the handling of matters.

Committees’ task areas:

**Grand Committee**
Formulation of national policy associated with membership of the European Union, with the exception of foreign and security policy. In dealing with EU affairs MPs from the Åland electoral district have the right to be present and to speak. The Grand Committee also considers any legislative proposals that are referred to it by the plenary session.

**Foreign Affairs Committee**
Changing or repealing major international agreements or other international obligations requiring Parliament’s approval, the management of foreign affairs, general security policy, peacekeeping policy, foreign trade policy, development cooperation and international organizations.

**Finance Committee**
State budget proposal and other Government proposals and motions regarding finance, legislation pertaining to taxes and similar charges as well as state borrowing.

**Audit Committee**
Oversight of the management of government finances and compliance with the budget.

**Administration Committee**
General organization of state administration, state administration at the regional and municipal levels, administrative procedures, state personnel policy, general regional and structural policy, public order and safety, rescue services, the Frontier Guard, immigration matters, municipal affairs and church matters.

**Legal Affairs Committee**
Matters involving family, estate, corporate, contract, property, criminal and procedural law as well as courts and tribunals.

**Transport and Communications Committee**
Road, rail, air and inland water traffic, navigation and communications.

**Agriculture and Forestry Committee**
Agriculture and forestry, veterinary medicine, hunting, fishing, reindeer husbandry and animal protection.

**Defence Committee**
Military service, the Defence Forces and legislation pertaining to emergencies.

**Education and Culture Committee**
Education, training, science, the arts, culture, sports, youth work and student aid.

**Social Affairs and Health Committee**
Social and health care, social security, social insurance and pension legislation.

**Commerce Committee**
Commerce, industry, business, consumer protection, competition, private insurance, energy, and finance and securities markets legislation.

**Committee for the Future**
Matters involving future development factors and development models, research regarding the future and evaluation of the consequences of technological development on society.

**Employment and Equality Committee**
Work environment, labour and employment, equality and non-military national service.

**Environment Committee**
Housing, land-use and building legislation, waste management, environmental protection and nature conservation.

It generally takes a month or two for a committee to handle a matter, but urgent business can be dealt with in a few days if necessary. Major legislative projects can take many months or even years. The picture is from a Legal Affairs Committee meeting.
An MP is a legislator, a wielder of social influence, a representative of an electoral district and an international actor.

Although a large part of an MP’s week is spent in committees and plenary sessions, Parliament is not the only place where an MP works.

In addition to a political party an MP represents an electoral district and is expected to keep up with regional matters. Electoral districts are drawn so as to ensure that sparsely populated areas are also represented in Parliament.

Nearly every MP has tasks that require work-related trips abroad. Parliament elects Finland’s representatives to international organizations such as the Nordic Council, the Council of Europe and the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly. In connection with committee work MPs travel abroad several times during an electoral term, in addition to which international organizations send MPs to monitor elections in other countries and make sure they are fair.

Nowadays reading and answering e-mails takes an increasing amount of MPs’ time. If MPs want to be reelected, they have to tour their electoral district and keep in touch with voters. Many MPs are actively involved in local politics, which takes time as well. Parliament also receives a lot of visitors, who want to meet their own MP.

MPs in the regions and the world

Following what MPs are doing

Citizens can find out what MPs have been doing and saying in many ways. All of MPs’ speeches in the Plenary Hall are recorded in webcasts as well as the record of plenary sessions. Parliament’s website also shows voting results, which can be used to see how an MP has voted in a particular matter. Only personal elections, such as the election of the Speaker, are conducted with closed ballots.

MPs’ speeches, legislative and budgetary motions, written questions and all other parliamentary actions are included in the archives under an MP’s name.

Practically all MPs have their own website, where they provide information on timely parliamentary work and tell where and when voters can meet them. Up-to-date information on MPs’ remuneration is available on Parliament’s website. At the beginning of the current electoral term in 2011 a first-term MP’s salary was 6,335 euros a month.
Almost anyone can become an MP. Candidates must be at least 18 years of age and Finnish citizens.

There are two ways a person can be elected to Parliament: through a political party or a constituency association. The latter can be established by a group of one hundred eligible voters from the same electoral district.

In Finland citizens vote not just for a party but for a particular candidate. People generally vote for someone who has similar values or has otherwise gained a voter’s confidence by promoting a specific cause. The candidates who are elected have generally gained support and become well known through working life or organizational activities.

Parliamentary elections are held every four years, at which time MPs are elected in direct, proportional and secret ballots. Each citizen who is eligible has one vote.

Parliament does not arrange parliamentary elections itself. In Finland this task is the responsibility of the Ministry of Justice.

About one-third of MPs are not returned in an election. Some MPs step down after one or two terms, but Parliament also includes MPs who have served for over thirty years.

Who can become an MP?
Finns have elected MPs in direct elections for over a hundred years. Along with the right to vote we received the right to stand for election.

The Parliament Act that came into force in 1906 was a monumental reform. The old Diet of Estates was replaced by a unicameral Parliament and universal and equal suffrage was introduced. No longer was the right to vote dependent on social status or sex. The reform increased the electorate tenfold. In 1907 the world’s first 19 women MPs were elected.

Parliament met in temporary facilities until 1931, when the Parliament Building was completed. Designed by Johan Sigfrid Siren, the Parliament Building is the most important symbol of Finland’s independence and democracy. The Parliament Building belongs to the Finnish people and is open to the public. It receives over 100,000 visitors a year.

The new Constitution that entered into force on 1 March 2000 strengthened Parliament’s position as Finland’s supreme organ of state. Parliament elects the Prime Minister, for example.

Universal and equal right to vote

Finnish women were the first in the world to receive full political rights, including the right to stand for election as well as the right to vote. In 1907 many men were also able to exercise the same rights for the first time.
The unicameral Parliament met in rented facilities for 24 years to begin with. From 1907 to 1910 it met in the Fire Brigade building, which was located on a lot between the National Gallery and Aleksanterinkatu. This picture shows Speaker P.E. Svinhufvud chairing Parliament’s first plenary session in 1907.

From 1911 to 1931 Parliament met in the Heimola building, important decisions that were made in this building included Finland’s declaration of independence in 1917. The Heimola building, which was located in present-day Yliopistokatu, was torn down in the 1960s.

Wartime Parliament

When the Winter War broke out on 30 November 1939 and Helsinki became a target for air raids, the decision was made to shift legislative work to a safer place. Before evacuating to the town of Kauhajoki in South Ostrobothnia, Parliament met twice at the Workers’ Hall in Vallila. Parliament held 34 plenary sessions in Kauhajoki. The first took place on 5 December 1939 and the last on 12 February 1940. Finland and Britain were the only belligerent nations in Europe whose parliaments continued to meet without interruption throughout the war. The school house where Parliament met in Kauhajoki was refurbished and made into a museum, which was inaugurated in connection with Parliament’s centennial in 2007.

As a result of the renovation of the Parliament Building, which is set to start in 2015, Parliament will move to temporary facilities. A temporary plenary hall will be built in the concert hall at the Sibelius Academy. The objective is to complete the renovation of the Parliament Building in time to celebrate the centennial of Finland’s independence in 2017.
Additional information about Parliament

Parliament’s online services
Parliament’s website www.eduskunta.fi provides information on Parliament and legislative work. It includes pages on plenary sessions, committees, MPs and legislative matters.

A special web portal for young people www.nuorteneduskunta.fi contains basic information about Parliament and Finnish democracy together with advice on how to find out more and influence matters. The site also serves Youth Parliament clubs in schools and is a data bank for teachers.

Watch Parliament in session!
The public is welcome to observe plenary sessions of Parliament. The door to the public gallery, located on the right side of the steps leading up to the Parliament Building, opens 15 minutes before each session. The entrance is accessible to persons with disabilities. The Plenary Hall is equipped with an induction loop.

Guided tours
Guided tours of Parliament are arranged for groups on weekdays between 9 am and 4.15 pm, except during sessions. Bookings can be made by e-mail to oppaat@eduskunta.fi. On weekends guided tours are arranged on Saturdays at 11 am and 12.30 pm and do not require advance booking.

Visitor’s Centre
The Visitor’s Centre is located in the Little Parliament building. Visitors can find out more about Parliament by watching a DVD or picking up brochures. The Visitor’s Centre has a wireless network as well as computers with Internet access that can be used free of charge.

Library of Parliament
The Library of Parliament is open to all citizens. In addition to Parliament it serves anyone who needs information about Parliament, the law or society.

Parliament on Facebook
Parliament of Finland status updates on Facebook provide you with a glimpse into MPs work as well as sundry events at Parliament House.

www.facebook.com/suomeneduskunta