PARLIAMENT
of
FINLAND
Dear Reader

Every MP has a vision of a better Finland. Parliamentary work is translating these two hundred visions into a better future, and it is up to the voters to evaluate how well we are doing.

The most important event this four-year term is the Centenary of Finnish Independence. Parliament House was built as a monument to our Independence. As such it will be a fitting venue for the Centenary Jubilee plenary session in December 2017, at which time the renovations of Parliament House ought to be completed.

I hope this brochure will give you a better idea of what we do and why Parliament exists.

Welcome to the Finnish parliament!

Maria Lohela, Speaker of Parliament
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.

Parliament convenes in temporary facilities until 2017, or as long as renovations of Parliament House are under way.

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 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. 50,000 voters can bring a legislative proposal to the deliberation of Parliament by signing a Citizens’ initiative. 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 a 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.
Speech and decision-making

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 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.
Committees prepare decisions

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, 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 above is from the Commerce Committee, and the picture on the right is from the meeting of the Grand 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, peace-keeping 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 Social Affairs and Health Committee meeting.
International cooperation in its various forms is part of everyday work at parliament. Newly elected Speaker of Parliament Maria Lohela welcomes the president of Tanzania Jakaya Kikwete to parliament in the spring of 2015.

The Centre Party parliamentary group is the largest parliamentary group in parliament. It convenes in the parliament auditorium during renovations of Parliament House.

Members form parliamentary groups according to political party, and these play a key role in parliamentary work on a practical level. Each parliamentary group elects its own chairpersons and possibly other organs.

There is no legal obligation to join a parliamentary group, but Members usually belong to their own party’s group, of which there are currently eight.

Members discuss timely political issues at parliamentary group meetings and decide what stance to take on matters being considered by Parliament. Group meetings are prepared by a working committee or the chairpersons.

Discussions in a parliamentary group are usually conducted on the basis of the chairperson’s proposal. If agreement cannot be reached on a matter, decisions may be put to a vote. Groups generally strive to reach a consensus, however. The parliamentary groups normally meet on Thursdays.

Parliamentary Groups Facilitate Decision-Making

Stronger position for the parliamentary groups

Parliamentary work is directed by the Speaker and Deputy Speakers, who are responsible for negotiating with other parliamentary groups on a group’s position, among other things. The nature of a parliamentary group’s work depends largely on whether a party is in the Government or the opposition.

MPs belonging to government party groups generally support government proposals, but do suggest amendments to these during committee deliberations.

Opposition groups have an important role in democracy: They criticize government decisions, present alternatives and demand that government ministers justify their decisions.

MPs from parliamentary groups representing both government and opposition work together in committees.

The parliamentary groups facilitate decision-making in Parliament, and their position has been strengthened in recent years. The parliamentary groups have been active since the early days of the unicameral Parliament, but their role as a political actor was only given full recognition in the Constitution that was approved in 2000.
Almost anyone can become an MP. Candidates must be at least 18 years of age and Finnish citizens. 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.

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.

As a voter you can follow your MP at work in many different ways. For instance, All of MPS’ speeches in the Plenary Hall are recorded in webcasts as well as the record of plenary sessions. Moreover, practically all MPs have their own website or on social media, where they provide information on timely parliamentary work.
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 Sirén, 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.
Renovation of Parliament House

After the Little Parliament was completed in 2004, Parliament began to prepare for the renovation of its other properties. Although the point of departure of this project was the modernisation of the technical facilities of Parliament’s buildings and structures, the renovation also aims to improve safety, energy-efficiency and accessibility.

The renovation has progressed in phases with only one building or building part being worked on at a time. This has enabled Parliament to continue working at Arkadianmäki throughout the renovation project. In an effort to minimise rental expenses, civil servants and MPs’ personal assistants have worked in less spacious premises in different stages of the renovation by, for example, temporarily sharing offices.

Plenary sessions will be held in the Sibelius Academy building during the renovation of Parliament House in 2015–2017. The building is in the same block as Parliament House and its concert hall has undergone an alteration to make it suitable for plenary session work. The entire building has been leased by Parliament and the majority of the committees, among others, will convene there. The final plenary session at Parliament House before the commencement of the renovation was held on 13 February 2015, after which the entire granite fortress was transformed into a building site.

The aim is to hold the jubilee plenary session marking the centenary of Finland’s independence in a fully renovated Parliament House. Parliament House is listed as a national historic landmark.
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 doors to the public gallery open 15 minutes before each session. The temporary session hall is not accessible for persons with disabilities.
Address: Eduskuntakatu 2.
You may also follow webcasts from the session: www.eduskunta.fi

Visitor’s Centre
The Visitor’s Centre is located in the Little Parliament building. Visitors can find out more about Parliament by watching a presentation film or picking up brochures. There is free wifi in the Visitor’s Centre café.
Address: Arkadiankatu 3.

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.
Address: Aurorankatu 6.

Guided tours
No guided tours are available during the renovations of Parliament House. Guided tours will resume in the fall of 2017.

The five session hall statues by sculptor Wäinö Aaltonen watch over an underground hallway for the duration of Parliament House renovations.

Parliament on Twitter
The fastest way to receive news flashes from parliament is the Finnish-language Twitter account.
@SuomenEduskunta