

# **Encouraging a longer time horizon: The Committee for the Future in the Finnish Eduskunta**

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## **Abstract**

Legislatures and members of parliament are normally not viewed as particularly adept at seeing beyond the next elections. More broadly, as recent debates about global warming indicate, policy-making is often criticized as being predominantly reactive, with politicians responding in piecemeal fashion to current problems. Yet parliaments routinely adopt laws that stay in force for decades or otherwise have important long-term consequences. How well legislatures can predict the future or prepare for it is thus a question really worth asking. Focusing on the Finnish Eduskunta, this paper critically examines the role of the Committee for the Future, a unique parliamentary institution that was established in 1993 “to generate dialogue with the government on major future problems and opportunities”. Drawing on parliamentary documents and interviews, the paper explores the Committee’s role through its unique tasks and working practices, and assesses whether its position has institutionalized within the Eduskunta and state administration more generally. The paper also evaluates the Committee’s impact on Finnish long-term politics, identifies its strengths and weaknesses, and puts forward practical recommendations for turning legislatures into more forward-thinking institutions.

## **1. Introduction**

A typical view of politics is that members of parliament (MP) are primarily motivated by re-election, and there is indeed a large body of research showing how the electoral calendar shapes the behaviour of vote-seeking MPs that become more active and less afraid to dissent the party line as elections approach. Regular elections are of course an essential pillar of democracy, making both MPs and their political parties more responsive to voters. Yet the alleged inability to see ‘beyond the next elections’ constitutes also a serious challenge for long-term problem-solving. As recent debates about global warming or increased migration flows indicate, policy-making is often criticized as being predominantly reactive, with politicians responding in piecemeal fashion to current problems. How well legislatures can predict the future or prepare for it is thus a question really worth asking.

Hence this paper analyses the Committee for the Future (CF), established in 1993 in the Finnish Eduskunta “to generate dialogue with the government on major future problems and opportunities”. While several legislatures across the world have set up temporary commissions to look into various long-term policy issues from digitalization to climate change, CF is to our best knowledge a unique

institution: it is the only permanent parliamentary committee with a specific mandate to study the future.<sup>1</sup> The Committee for the Future is also unique among the Eduskunta committees in the sense that it is not part of the legislative machinery: it does not process draft bills and therefore the government-opposition cleavage is not as important as in the other committees. This also presents a dilemma for the CF: often admired by foreign observers, it needs to prove its worth and support among MPs for its continued existence.

This is why we lean on the concept of ‘institutionalization’ as our main theoretical framework. Institutionalization has both an internal (established ‘ways of doing things’) and external (recognition by other actors) dimension. Applied to our case, the institutionalization of the Committee for the Future is achieved through developing internal stability and external legitimacy. But here the CF must also make choices: essentially free to determine its own agenda and procedures, it can decide what issues to focus on and how to conduct its business. As we argue in our theoretical section, the CF faces inevitable trade-offs. If it deals with contested, topical matters it is likely to resemble a normal committee, with the main line of division between cabinet and opposition parties. The other option is to aim at a more consensual, cross-party mode through prioritizing less salient matters. The first strategy entails the risk of the CF losing its unique, deliberative character, whereas the second alternative may result in it becoming a harmless, hardly noticed organ.

Empirically this paper has descriptive, analytical, and normative or practical goals. The main research questions asked are “how does the Committee for the Future work and what is its impact in the Eduskunta and in Finnish politics?” and “has the Committee for the Future achieved both internal and external institutionalization?” Following our theoretical section, we briefly introduce the parliamentary context of the Eduskunta. Drawing on parliamentary documents and 14 interviews from current and former members and chairs of the CF and other high-ranking operatives of Eduskunta, which were carried out in spring 2019, the empirical section both charts the activities of the CF since the 1990s whilst uncovering how it works and interacts with the Eduskunta, the

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<sup>1</sup> The closest is the Scotland Futures Forum, the futures think-tank of the Scottish Parliament. Established in 2005 and bringing together both MPs and external experts, it works on a non-party basis, with the aim of looking “beyond the electoral cycle to stimulate debate on the long-term challenges and opportunities that Scotland faces.” The Scotland Futures Forum was very much inspired by the Committee for the Future of the Eduskunta (Groombridge 2006). For more information, see <http://scotlandfutureforum.org/>.

government, and external stakeholders.<sup>2</sup> Linking our findings to institutionalization, we pay special attention to how the functions and position of the CF have changed over time. As policy-makers across the world grapple with the problem of designing structures for long-term planning and avoiding harmful short-termism (e.g., González-Ricoy & Gosseries 2016; Jacobs 2016; Boston 2017), the concluding discussion reflects on the strengths and weaknesses of the Committee for the Future whilst putting forward practical recommendations for turning legislatures into more forward-thinking institutions.

## **2. Theoretical framework: institutionalizing a novel parliamentary committee**

Our theoretical framework is based on the concept of institutionalization. The classic or standard definition of the term was coined by Huntington (1968: 12), according to whom it is “the process by which organizations and procedures acquire value and stability.” Institutionalization has been utilized in a variety of disciplines from organization studies to sociology, and political scientists have used it to examine political systems (Huntington 1965; 1968), political movements such as trade unions (Levitsky 1998), political parties (Janda 1980; Panebianco 1988, Harmel & Svåsand 1993; Randall & Svåsand 2002; Harmel et al. 2018), and also legislatures, including their committees (e.g., Polsby 1968; Hibbing 1988; Norton 1998; Kopecký 2001; Rittberger 2012).<sup>3</sup>

Institutionalization should primarily be viewed as a framework through which one can study the evolution and change of political movements and organisations. For example, students of political parties have explored whether parties have persevered after the departure of their founding figures, while scholars of legislatures have investigated whether parliaments can develop both internal maturity and external legitimacy. In line with institutional theory, institutionalization literature has also emphasized the ability of organisations to absorb shocks and outlive other ‘critical junctures’. To summarize, an ‘institutionalized’ organisation or movement has three main components (Harmel et al. 2018):

- (a) internal institutionalization: established ways of doing things, both regarding written rules and social norms; and
- (b) external institutionalization: recognition and also acceptance by other actors; and

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<sup>2</sup> We are grateful to Johannes Ahvo from Tampere University for his excellent research assistance. Full list of analysed documents are available from the authors. Due to mutual agreement, the interviewees’ names are not disclosed in this paper.

<sup>3</sup> As institutional theory has become the main approach to study organisations, there is a vast literature studying in some way the ‘institutionalization’ of various political institutions and movements. Hence the literature we cite are only examples of a much wider range of research.

(c) durability: continued existence, particularly through shocks and hard times.

In terms of causal mechanisms, one can obviously argue that (c) is strongly conditional upon (a) and (b), as the stability and indeed survival of an institution depends on it enjoying support among its members and, to lesser extent, also among external actors. Most of the literature has emphasized the first component, as organisations – for example, well-resourced interest groups – can achieve durability even without explicit recognition by others. Yet these studies do recognise the importance of external institutionalization, as organisations in most cases need to be perceived as legitimate by relevant outside actors. In fact, institutionalization has often been used by political scientists quite loosely to describe a gradual process wherein an organisation achieves internal stability whilst becoming an autonomous actor with its own rules and norms. This applies particularly to the literature on parliaments, including the article by Norton (1998) on committees, which have very much focused on how legislatures and their various sub-units have evolved over the decades. For example, Polsby (1968: 145) in his classic study of the U.S. Congress suggested that an institutionalized legislature meets three criteria: it is well-bounded, i.e., differentiated from its environment; it is sufficiently complex with its own division of labour, codes of conduct, and shared norms; and it uses universalistic rather than particularistic working methods, with members following rules and precedents. Subsequent studies have adapted Polsby’s criteria, but much of the literature has been quite vague in its operationalization or measurement of the concept.<sup>4</sup>

Let us next delve deeper into the first two components and adapt them to our case of a parliamentary committee. Internal institutionalization refers to the way in which the institution works. It should establish routines, division of labour, and patterns of behaviour that are not reliant on the founders of the institution (that often strongly shape the way the organisation functions) or indeed on individual persons. Instead, the institution should have stable practices that are also perceived as legitimate by its members. Already Huntington (1968) underlined the importance of “stable, valued, recurring patterns of behaviour”, while subsequent research has emphasized the interaction between written rules and behaviour: even when there are no actual written codes of conduct, there should be a shared understanding of how to proceed in social situations – or what March and Olsen (1989) referred to as the ‘logic of appropriateness’. Hence what matters is that the members of the institution recognise the rules and behave accordingly.

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<sup>4</sup> For a critique of how institutionalization has been applied in research on legislatures, see Judge (2003; 2008).

Transferring these general notions to the environment of parliamentary committees, they by default do have written rules, with even national constitutions containing regulations about committees. Typical standing legislative committees may have existed for decades, and often parliaments have a set of standard rules of procedure that apply to all committees, with individual committees then supplementing them, if needed, with their own specific rules. Such rules of procedure normally detail matters such as committee decision-making, agenda formation, speaking order, and types of committee outputs. Hence MPs, when changing committees, are familiar with the ‘way of the house’ and can adapt to the new committee without difficulties. Institutionalized committees should thus display organizational maturity, with a set of established procedures and norms. (Norton 1998) In terms of the Committee for the Future, the Eduskunta has its own standing orders that also contain rules about committee work. The CF should have also developed stable practices and ‘committee culture’ over the years. However, more crucial here is the atypical, non-legislative character of the CF. The agendas of legislative committees are normally crowded with government bills, leaving precious little time for other matters. The Committee for the Future, on the other hand, can shape its own agenda and decide what it does. Compared with legislative committees, it is thus arguably even more significant in terms of institutionalization that the MPs in the CF, or those thinking about seeking a seat in it, approve its working methods. In our empirical analysis we thus examine the ‘routinization’ of committee work and how the interviewed MPs and other persons close to the CF view its internal proceedings.

Turning to external institutionalisation, it refers to the organisation being perceived as relevant and legitimate by outside actors. For political institutions to survive, particularly in periods of crisis, they need to cultivate support among the broader political elite and the public. Without external recognition, institutions and movements are likely to break down, with their members perhaps seeking alternative channels of influence. What matters again is the over time dimension: external recognition should be based on long-term expectations – outside actors should consider the institution as having relevance in the long run, not just in the present moment or in the past.

Viewed from the perspective of parliamentary committees, both case studies and comparative research indicates that they have become more powerful bodies inside legislatures in recent decades (Longley & Davidson 1998; Norton 1998; Martin 2014). Jurisdictional reshuffles aside, standard legislative committees normally do not need to worry about their position: they remain the backbone of parliamentary work, processing government draft laws that fall under their respective spheres of competence. Even if an individual committee suffers temporarily from a bad reputation

inside the legislature, such problems can be normally addressed through changing the committee chair or other personnel. For the CF, however, the situation is again more challenging, with external institutionalization – arguably not just in the Eduskunta but also among external stakeholders – highly important for its survival. It is not needed for legislation, so it has to prove its worth in other ways. As its name implies, it should do something meaningful in terms of preparing for the future. This could refer to outputs such as committee reports and/or to providing an exciting forum for discussing future-related matters. Here it faces a potential trade-off: it can either ‘play it safe’ by focusing on less salient issues or it can take risks and deal with topical matters that cause divisions in the Eduskunta. The advantage of the former alternative is that the CF will not raise tensions in the parliament, and outside observers, including MPs, might value its consensual, cross-party mode of operation. The downside is that the CF might become a marginal actor devoid of any real impact and purpose. If, on the other hand, the CF deliberately tackles salient questions, such as immigration or climate change, then it might start resembling the legislative committees, with the government-opposition cleavage dominating its proceedings. At the same time the CF would undoubtedly generate more media interest. In order to assess the external institutionalization of the Committee for the Future, we rely on interviews as well as explore its agenda and the impact its work has in the Eduskunta and in the society at large. We also pay attention to the ‘attractiveness’ of the CF and whether its status and impact have varied over time.

We also leave the door open for the possibility of de-institutionalization, which refers primarily to the gradual decay of institutions or movements. Regarding internal de-institutionalization, it would mean the substitution of routine structures with more ad hoc, piece-meal practices. Another, probably more important, indicator would be the members starting to question the worthiness of the institution. External de-institutionalization could come in the form of outside actors no longer perceiving the institution as relevant or legitimate. Obviously de-institutionalization could also be triggered by a ‘critical juncture’. Applied to our case, the path towards de-institutionalization of the Committee for the Future could thus result from either its members or the Eduskunta as a whole viewing it increasingly negatively, or as simply surplus to the requirements.

### **3. The Committee for the Future: establishment and context**

The Eduskunta is itself without any doubt an institutionalized legislature. Its internal structures have evolved gradually over the decades, and recent constitutional reforms have strengthened its position in the Finnish political system. Overall, party discipline is strong, with MPs expected to follow the party line in both the plenary and in the committees. The Eduskunta along with other Nordic

legislatures can be classified as a ‘working’ parliament as opposed to ‘debating’ parliaments like the House of Commons. Working parliaments are characterised by standing orders that emphasise committee work over plenary debates, with a parliamentary culture where MPs focus on scrutiny of documents in committees instead of grand speeches on the floor. In addition, working legislatures are, on average, more consensual, with party-political cooperation taking also place between governing and opposition parties (Arter 1999: 211-217; Bergman & Strøm 2011; Raunio & Wiberg 2014).

Institutionalization applies also to committees. In the Eduskunta, committee deliberations are a compulsory part of the legislative process, precede the plenary stage, and committees must report to the plenary on all matters under consideration except private members’ bills and motions. Committees meet behind closed doors and ministers do not hold seats on committees. According to Section 35 of the constitution, for each electoral term the Eduskunta appoints the Grand Committee (the European Affairs committee), the Constitutional Law Committee, the Foreign Affairs Committee, the Finance Committee, the Audit Committee and the other standing committees provided in the Eduskunta’s rules of procedure.<sup>5</sup> Currently there are 16 committees. It appears that the frequency and duration of committee meetings have risen over time. In line with the ‘working parliament’ thesis, committees are the central arena for constructive argumentation and party-political cooperation, including between government and opposition parties (Helander et al. 2007; Pekonen 2011). Committees aim at unanimous decisions without voting, but an individual MP or the losing minority can add its dissenting view to the committee reports or statements. The number of such dissenting opinions has increased since the turn of the millennium, with roughly every fifth report or statement containing a dissenting view (Mattila 2014).

Despite its uniqueness, previous literature has paid only scant attention to the Committee for the Future. Arter (2000) provides an informative and detailed account of the formation of the committee and the 1990s when it functioned as a temporary committee. Boston (2017: 401-415) meanwhile examines the CF as part of his general analysis of the ‘Finnish foresight model’. The decision to establish Government Reports on the Future and the CF need to be understood in the context of the severe economic recession of the early 1990s that followed the collapse of the Soviet bloc. Caught (unprepared) in a new situation and with the economic and political environment of Finland changing fast, there was broad support in the Eduskunta for the governmental future reports

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<sup>5</sup> The Constitution of Finland, 11 June 1999, 731/1999, available at <https://www.finlex.fi/fi/laki/kaannokset/1999/en19990731.pdf>.

and the CF that was first appointed as a temporary committee in 1993. The first governmental future reports were considered a success, and in general there was a shared feeling among MPs that the CF was bringing a new dimension to parliamentary work. The Committee for the Future was thus turned into a permanent committee in 2000, but in many ways it was a ‘shaky start’ and there was opposition towards the CF throughout the 1990s. Many thought that the CF was simply unnecessary, as surely existing standing committees could exercise long-term planning as part of their standard legislative scrutiny, while others rejected the idea of a permanent committee that had no legislative or budgetary duties (Arter 2000; Boston 2017: 407-408).<sup>6</sup> The formation of the CF and the requirement of the government to produce future reports were strongly influenced by two parliamentarians with academic backgrounds: Eero Paloheimo (Green League) and Martti Tiuri (National Coalition). Paloheimo and Tiuri were both from Helsinki University of Technology with a long-standing interest in the ‘future’, and they lobbied hard to build a cross-party majority of MPs behind the CF (Arter 2000).<sup>7</sup>

The Committee for the Future is thus since 2000 a permanent standing committee with 17 MPs and a staff of 4 clerks. With the exception of the Grand Committee, Finance Committee, and Audit Committee, all Eduskunta committees have 17 members. Some committees, particularly those with broader jurisdictions, have more staff (6-10), while several committees have four clerks. According to its website, the CF “serves as a Think Tank for futures, science and technology policy in Finland. The counterpart cabinet member is the Prime Minister.”<sup>8</sup> It defines its mission as generating dialogue with the government on major future problems and opportunities. The primary task of the CF 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; discusses future trends and related issues; analyses research and methodology looking at future; and serves as the parliamentary body responsible for assessing technological development and its

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<sup>6</sup> In fact, in December 1999 the Constitutional Law Committee voted 13-4 against giving the CF permanent status. In the final plenary vote the permanent status of the CF was approved with 96 votes to 73. (Arter 2000: 153)

<sup>7</sup> Paloheimo was the first chair of the temporary committee upon its establishment in 1993 while Tiuri chaired the CF from 1996 to 2003. According to Tiuri particularly MPs with background in law were initially against the CF, as they saw that the Eduskunta should deal only with law-making. Paloheimo and Tiuri disagreed about the direction of the CF’s work: the former emphasized environmental issues while Tiuri prioritized technological development. (Kunttu 2007: 352-355).

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<https://www.eduskunta.fi/EN/lakiensaaminen/valiokunnat/tulevaisuusvaliokunta/Pages/default.aspx>.

societal consequences. However, as the CF 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.” How the CF makes use of its freedom, and whether indeed it manages to ‘stake out policy lines for the future’, are among the questions we analyse in our empirical section.

## 4. Empirical analysis

### 4.1. Tasks: what does the Committee for the Future do?

The CF does not perform traditional committee tasks, i.e. scrutinize legislative proposals and budgets or monitor governmental departments. Because Eduskunta work revolves around these tasks, the CF operates largely outside of the ordinary parliamentary process. While independence enhances its potential to raise future-sensitive issues, outsider status limits CF’s policy impact. This tension is a key for understanding its unique role.

The CF’s principal task is to prepare Eduskunta’s official response (the Future report, *tulevaisuusmietintö*) to Government’s future report (*tulevaisuusselonteko*), which on Eduskunta’s request has been issued once per electoral term since 1993. The ‘dialogue’ around the reports forms the formal-institutional ‘backbone’ of CF’s existence. (Tiihonen 2011.) The founders of CF understood that in order to consolidate the CF two requirements had to be met: 1) CF’s work needed to build around an official government matter, which, on the other hand, 2) could not threaten established institutions, especially other committees. The report mechanism (*selontekomenettely*), which had been introduced alongside ordinary government bills to enhance information flow between the government and the Eduskunta, provided a perfect tool because despite of its official nature it was broad enough not to cause turf wars between the committees (interviews).

Government’s future report is a declaration of government’s will on a specific yet broad issue that has significant bearing on the future. The prime minister sets its theme, which is usually announced in accordance with new government programme, and the Prime Minister’s Office (PMO) directs the preparation process. (Prime Minister’s Office 2007, 22-24). The dialogue between CF and PMO is ongoing, opening a possibility for the CF to influence the theme of the report, for example through its previous report that is usually issued at the very end of the electoral term. The CF tried and

sometimes managed to affect government's agenda already in the 1990s (Arter 2000) and due to the 'thickening' of the Finnish foresight network, the 'dialogue' has since deepened and provides more opportunities for the CF to influence the report. However, it is still up to the prime minister how far the government is willing to follow. (Interviews) So far governments have submitted seven future reports. The reports differ significantly in terms of themes, scope and policy focus, often reflecting topical issues (Boston 2017: 404). For example, the first report (1993) dealt with Finland's changing external environment and the two reports from the 1995-1999 electoral term studied Finland's place and role in the world (Finland joined the European Union (EU) in 1995). Other themes include population development and work (2001), the challenges of aging population (2004), carbon neutral future (2009), sustainable growth (2013) and the future of work (2017, 2018). The reports are substantial in their scope and depth. Since 2004 their length has varied from 59 (2004) to 180 pages (2009), with the reports issued in the 2010s 70 to 90 pages long.

The government issues its report around the middle of the term. Through 'the dialogue' the CF has learned about the report's contents and the CF's own research and assessment activities (see below), engage in thematic correspondence in order to 'develop capacity' for answering the government's report (Hietanen & Tiihonen 2014). After receiving the report, the CF calls dozens of experts to weigh in on its theme. Compared to other committees, the CF clearly emphasises academic experts instead of the usual interest groups that give evidence to Eduskunta committees (Seo 2017: 131-132). If the report is too narrow (in relation to what was communicated with the government), the CF may expand its reply considerably and thus deal with a broader array of topics. (Interviews) The CF's reports are also extensive and detailed (Prime Minister's Office 2007: 17), roughly the same length as the government's reports.

Within the formal confines of the 'dialogue', the CF's main tools are resolutions (*ponsi, toimenpidealoite*), which it may place into its report. This way, the CF can 'put pressure' on the government to focus on tendencies it considers the most important. After the plenary has approved the CF's future report, the resolutions do not bind the government in a strict manner, but instead act as instructions on what the Eduskunta wants the government to focus on. The government reports to the CF in its annual reports on how it has reacted to the resolutions and the resolutions stay in force until the CF 'kills' them – also over the next elections, providing thus a tool for genuine intertemporal policy-making. (Interviews) However, due to their often abstract and horizontal character, the execution and monitoring of resolutions has posed problems (Prime Minister's Office 2007: 46).

Overall, the future ‘dialogue’ has been deemed relevant, if not the easiest way to enable future-oriented interaction between government and Eduskunta (Prime Minister’s Office 2007: 44). Its main problem is timing. The CF’s future report is usually submitted at the very end of the term when the plenary is usually busy with other, often more important, issues. Hence the time allocated to debating the CF’s detailed, complex and long report tends to be short. Also, because the government’s report has already been published, the CF’s reply is, in a sense, ‘old news’. However, the CF’s report may direct the themes of the next government’s future report. When it works, the ‘dialogue’ thus produces significant policy continuity between governments. (Interviews)

The CF’s second official task is to, upon request from another committee, to issue statements (*lausunto*) regarding government bills on which the other committee is preparing a report. A core task of ordinary committees, issuing statements has never been a significant task for the CF who consider them a minor issue, even a time-consuming redundancy that ‘merely serves Eduskunta’s formal process’ (interviews). In 2000-2018 the CF issued a total of 82 statements, averaging 4,3 per year. In 2009-2017 all committees issued, on average, 19,6 statements per year. 81 of CF’s statements were responses to government annual reports (*vuosikertomus*), reports (*selonteko*), budgets and assessments (*selvitys*) – only one statement dealt with legislation. The CF’s minor presence in Eduskunta’s statement work reflects its weak stance in ordinary parliamentary affairs. According to the interviewees a deeper involvement would require a more legislative orientation from the CF – something it has actively avoided. However, in late 2010s, along with the CF’s administrative reform, it has moved closer to Eduskunta’s everyday operations (interview). In 2000-2009 the annual average of statements was 3,7, in 2010-2018 five. During past three years (2016-2018), under the new general secretary, the CF has produced seven statements per year.

The first CF (1993-1995) focused almost exclusively on the future report, but when CF 2 was instituted in 1996, a major emphasis was put on technology assessment (TA). In 1999 when the CF 3 was instituted, its task description expanded to also include more general ‘analysis and evaluation of future development factors and models’. (Arter 2000; Tiihonen 2011.) Nowadays, TA and other assessment activities are usually collapsed under the heading of CF’s ‘own projects’, research and assessment endeavours, which the CF may freely initiate on any topic it chooses. Every new CF begins by designing a work plan of project themes and establishing sub-committees responsible for the projects. Although the agenda is affected by the government’s future report and existing projects and resolutions, the agenda formation process is marked by extreme openness and commitment to deliberative practices. Before setting the final agenda for the electoral term, the CF hears experts

and deliberates extensively, usually for over six months. When the projects begin, they utilize open seminars, workshops, expert hearings and consultations with stakeholders and wider public to scrutinize their topics. A general secretary and a permanent science advisor assist the CF, and the CF has a small annual research budget (around 70 000 euros). The difference to ordinary committees' working style is clear. 'Own projects' give the CF a possibility to take a more proactive stance on future politics (interviews).

In 2000-2018 the CF produced 76 publications on 'remarkable range of topics' (Boston 2017: 410), from gene- and nanotechnology to ICT ethics and municipal democracy. 60 % of the reports were extensive and thorough, over 50 pages long – 36 % well over 100 pages long. The longer reports, often commissioned from external experts, are published as books and are often praised for their quality. For example, OECD considered CF's recent work on radical technologies as one of the best technology foresight reports in the world (Committee for the Future 2018). The amount of projects and reports has increased considerably over time: in the 1990s the CF produced only few publications, in 2000-2004 its output increased to 10 publications (two per year and around 60 pages per report), in 2005-2009 to 3,8 per year (average length 90 pages), and in 2010-2014 to 7,6 per year (105 pages on average). In 2015-2018 the annual average amount decreased (to 4,25), but the average length increased to 135 pages. The CF's own resources have not changed, so the most credible explanation is that CF's external help, which it acquires through its networks and 'crowdsourcing' initiatives, has increased as Boston (2017) and interviews suggest.

While the 'future dialogue' continues to form the CF's formal-institutional backbone, 'own projects' have developed into CF's main task (Boston 2017; Committee for the Future 2018; interviews). According to one interviewee, this relates to the projects' proactive nature, which provides important counterbalance to Eduskunta's work that is mostly reactive. However, many noted that the reports rarely receive much attention, probably because so few have time to assess the detailed works and they are difficult to connect to other parliamentary matters (interviews).

#### *4.2. Practices: how does the CF operate?*

A detailed procedure about how committees operate is laid out in Eduskunta's 'committee manual'. The practices are largely described in relation to legislative work and therefore the CF, which is said to have 'special tasks', is not formally regulated much at all. The CF can largely define its own working practices and, as has already been hinted, they are rather unique, too.

First, contrary to ordinary committees which are known for their exclusive and even secretive nature, the CF has always emphasised openness and democratic inclusiveness (Tiihonen 2011: 16). The ‘permeability’ of the CF concerns both agenda formation and the work process. Members’ right to freely choose their projects is a fundamental characteristic of the CF’s operating culture (interviews). During the projects, CF adds ‘depth and momentum’ to its internal discussions through open seminars, workshops and online discussions (Tiihonen 2011: 5-6, 16). The Committee also actively seeks international influence. In 2010-2017 (excluding 2013) it took 39 international trips, one in every two months on average. This ‘smartening up process’ is another fundamental feature of the CF’s term-long ‘journey’, and ‘crowdsourcing’ adds a democratic element to the process and also provides resources. (Interviews) For example, in 2013 the CF utilized an online platform to gain citizen input regarding off-road traffic law (Aitamurto & Landemore 2013), and later it mixed online participation with expert hearings and thematic studies to produce a report on the future of welfare state (Seo 2017). We found no significant increase in events (2003-2018) and seminars (2010-2017), but it is clear that the Internet provided an entirely new frontier for the CF (interview). According to its annual reports from 2010-2014, the CF has put great effort in social media-based engagement and transparency initiatives (especially Facebook and YouTube). The 2014 report boasts that no other Eduskunta committee engages with citizens in similar fashion. However, its extravagant initiatives have also attracted ridicule and the initiatives have not been considered suitable for ordinary committees (interviews).

Another distinct characteristic of the CF is its commitment to non-partisan, deliberative style of discussion. Despite facing ideologically sensitive topics like globalization and welfare state, the CF operated in markedly non-partisan fashion already in the 1990s (Arter 2000). The interviewees, who agreed that the CF operates in markedly non-partisan way despite it often dealing with politically sensitive issues (TA makes up only around 20 % of its ‘own projects’), raised several reasons for the peculiar style. First, the CF produces research reports, assessments and scenarios on broad themes, not specific and binding laws. Second, the CF does not operate through confrontation like ordinary committees: it aims at analysis which is, naturally, ideologically-laden but still distant from ‘petty party politicking’. The third reason is that on average the CF attracts MPs that are more interested in analysing broad topics than engaging with ‘petty party politics’. As a result, the CF operates more like an academic seminar than a parliamentary committee. In addition to expert hearings which are conducted in more scientific style compared to ordinary committees’ hearings (Arter 2000: 151, 157), the CF has made explicit use of futures research methods like scenario building, which it aims to teach to its members every term (Tiihonen 2011).

Finally, all of CF's work is underlined by slowness and liberal attitude towards schedules, as it does not need to follow the hectic pace of legislative process and its own 'end products', future reports and projects, reach far beyond single electoral terms. Several interviewees highlighted 'the luxury' of the parliamentary 'think tank's' work speed, which allows leisurely deliberation. As one interviewee put, 'it is an antithesis to Twitter politics'. (Interviews)

#### *4.3. Internal institutionalization: distinct organisational culture and identity*

We defined internal institutionalization as organizations' 'established way of doing things', i.e. the consolidation of distinct tasks, routines, division of labour and patterns of behaviour that are not reliant on particular individuals. Can the CF be regarded as an internally institutionalized parliamentary committee? Already in the 1990s the CF's work was characterized by the future 'dialogue', 'own projects' and 'scientific', non-partisan, open and democratic working practices (Arter 2000). In her recent overview of the first two decades of the Committee for the Future, former general secretary of the CF Paula Tiihonen (2011) highlighted same characteristics and suggested that over the years the CF has developed an identity that provides it with independent continuity. Based on our findings, we concur: the CF has consolidated a set of tasks and practices that are rigid enough to be regarded as institution-like. From two future-oriented professor MPs' wild dream, it has developed into a full-fledged 'parliamentary think tank'. Its organizational culture and identity build on its political objective, which is to observe societal and technological trends that ordinary committees cannot detect. The operating practices which support the task – openness, science driven non-partisan deliberation, slowness, etc. – have consolidated and are defended headstrong if challenged. CF's anarchic character has become its strength. If it was excused in the 1990s, now it is proudly defended – or even raised above criticism. (Interviews)

According to Tiihonen (2011: 14) CF's most significant internal threat is that MPs become so unsatisfied with its influence or the quality of its work that they do not want to participate anymore. In order to survive, a committee needs to establish a distinguishable system of expectations, which MPs use in assessing the reasonableness of their membership. Do the members know what they get in the CF and do they value it enough to take part? Earlier research found that the members of the CF were generally well aware of the limited legislative impact of the CF and its low status in committee hierarchy. Yet, they were satisfied with its performance, especially because the CF has been a good place to learn and raise awareness about broad long-term issues and to discuss about them openly. (Arter 2000; Boston 2017) Our interviewees also recognized that the CF is not a place for political influence, in traditional sense. The main reasons for joining CF relate to the way it

works. Its open, relatively slow and broadly themed working process opens a space to learn about the future in a relaxed atmosphere, which is not tainted by day-to-day party politics. The CF appears to have developed a distinguishable and respected system of expectations and therefore it can be regarded as an institutionalized committee in this sense, too.

#### *4.4. External institutionalization: broader support, posing no threat*

We defined external institutionalization as ‘recognition and acceptance by other actors’, i.e. the consolidation of a sense relevance and legitimacy among relevant external stakeholders. Initially, the CF raised serious doubts in Eduskunta for its loose tasks and practices, and especially because of its minor role in legislation (Arter 2000: 152, 158). On the other hand, the need for parliamentary long-term assessment was so strong among MPs that the CF was formally established and consolidated even against the wishes of the powerful Constitutional Law Committee. (Tiihonen 2011.) While the CF is well acknowledged for bringing positive international reputation to the Eduskunta (Vainio 2007: 259; Tiihonen 2011; Committee for the Future 2018), its value and status inside the Eduskunta has remained unclear.

Based on our interviews, it seems clear that by late 2010s the CF has consolidated its position within the Eduskunta. However, its status relates to a bundle of factors and reasons that are less functional than institutionalization theory suggests. The CF has always enjoyed support among MPs and while it could be abolished simply by changing Eduskunta’s standing orders, such motivation is hard to find. While CF’s tasks and processes still raise eyebrows, most recognize the importance of its core topic, the future. Even if one does not believe in the importance of studying the future, voicing this out would seem irrational and is therefore unlikely. As the CF does not pose a threat to MPs, party groups or other committees, no one is incentivized to push for its dismissal while a significant share of MPs is always eager to take part in its work. A generational component also plays a role: the ‘old school’ for whom the CF seemed odd is slowly being replaced by younger MPs and clerks for whom the CF’s tasks and practices make more sense, because both future sensitivity and openness in decision-making have become salient topics in mainstream political discourses. The CF’s symbolic status that builds on its international recognition enhances its position within the Eduskunta. While the CF’s often detached input and antics are still not fully tolerated, even those who criticize the CF have gotten used to its presence.

An important external network for the CF is the government and especially the PMO, its correspondent ministry. Already in the 1990s the two institutions were ‘tangled in many ways’

through future reports and other future-related ‘policy community’ work (Arter 2000: 160-162). PMO evaluation report from 2007 declared that the ‘dialogue’ is appropriate, worth continuing and strengthening, and the interviewed MPs and civil servants considered that it had provided a good frame for Finland’s future politics and also consolidated CF’s position (Prime Minister’s Office 2007) Our interviews also suggest that the CF has institutionalized in the eyes of PMO, too, and due to the re-organization of the national foresight system and the emergence of a network-based operating procedure the bond has deepened in the 2010s. In 2017, the CF’s official duties strengthened considerably when it was made the official correspondent committee for the government’s report on sustainable development (the Agenda 2030 programme of the United Nations). Some in the government circles have suggested that the ‘dialogue’ has become too slow and redundant and should therefore be replaced with a more ‘agile’ form of interaction. However, only the Eduskunta can remove government’s obligation to produce the future report which provides the bedrock for CF’s formal status, and there appears to be no motivation for such action.

#### *4.5. Influencing Finnish politics?*

CF’s impact on Finnish politics has always raised doubts (Boston 2017). Ambiguity likely results from the lack of rigorous process tracing analysis and reliance on interviews. As this has been our choice, too, the following findings are merely indicative. In the 1990s few believed that the CF had much direct influence on Eduskunta’s positions (Arter 2000). Our results suggest that nothing has changed in this front: the CF is still too detached from ordinary Eduskunta work. However, many pointed out that the CF was never meant to be an ordinary legislative committee, but instead it was deliberately designed to detect wider societal trends. In the 2010s the CF has sought to establish a tighter connection with the rest of the Eduskunta by harmonizing routines and engaging more deeply with committee statements. This might bring more influence for the CF, but at the same time getting too close to ordinary committee work can jeopardize its unique objective.

The CF may also directly influence the government. Earlier research suggests that it has sometimes succeeded in placing themes to government programmes (Arter 2000; Boston 2017) and our interviews reveal a similar belief. While the CF’s future report rarely directly affects Eduskunta’s work, not least because it is issued at the end of the electoral term, its themes and resolutions may influence the programme of the next government. Interviewees named reports – on social welfare reform, digitalization of education and population development, for example – that have later emerged in government programmes. Here, the committee members’ status within their parties is very important. If a CF member becomes a cabinet minister, like Juha Sipilä (CF member in 2011-

2014) who was first selected to chair the Centre Party in 2012 and then became the prime minister in 2015, direct policy linkage may be significant. After assuming premiership, Sipilä ignited policies on themes he worked in the CF, especially on ‘piloting culture’. Although a less direct link, many interviewees pointed out that through the ‘dialogue’ the CF is well connected to ministries where its reports and resolutions probably enjoy a larger readership than in the Eduskunta. Overall, the CF appears to be politically stronger *vis-à-vis* the government than inside the parliament.

Mostly, however, the impact of the CF is indirect. For its members, the ‘journey’ is a ‘learning process’, which can influence politics through MPs other committee assignments and, more importantly, by ‘raising future leaders’. It is noteworthy that four out of six prime ministers appointed since 2000 had been CF members. Jyrki Katainen of National Coalition was a member of the CF in 1999-2003, chaired it in 2003-2007, and served as the prime minister from 2011 to 2014. Katainen noted in the CF’s 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary ball that, “Two electoral terms in the Committee for the Future left a powerful mark on me. It affected my way of viewing societal challenges. It taught about future phenomena and significantly affected my political priorities in my subsequent tasks” (Committee for the Future 2018: 20). One interviewee confirms that Katainen’s time in the CF, which he continued to chair despite becoming a party leader in 2004, significantly affected his views as both the party chair and as the prime minister – and Katainen’s government also included two other MPs that had served in the CF. Perhaps most commonly the CF is thought to influence politics through its publications that increase awareness of important threats and possibilities among political elites and wider public. However, our interviewees at the same time noted that sometimes even very good reports have no effect at all, or the effect might emerge only several years later.

## **5. Concluding reflections**

In the wake of newfound awareness for societal ‘megatrends’ like climate change, globalization, and migration, future sensitive policy-making has become a hot topic both for policy-makers and academia. How to overcome political myopia and design institutions facilitating far-sighted politics are thus receiving more attention than before (e.g., Boston 2017; Caney 2016; González-Ricoy & Gosseries 2016; Hovi et al. 2009; Jacobs 2016). The Finnish national foresight model has often been considered as a forerunner, especially because of the Committee for the Future, world’s first and only permanent parliamentary standing committee dedicated for future matters.

In this paper we analysed whether the CF, an ‘odd bird’ that emerged in early 1990s with its peculiar tasks and practices that defy ordinary parliamentary and committee work, has become

institutionalized, both internally and externally. It has clearly established and consolidated a distinct set of tasks, practices and rewards for its members and while some external stakeholders still frown upon its unusual antics, the existence of the Committee for the Future is not questioned. But perhaps a more important question is whether the CF has indeed managed to extend the time span of Finnish politics? The influence of the Committee for the Future is difficult to measure, but our analysis indicates that the impact of the CF is largely dependent on individual MPs or the government adopting insights from the meetings and reports of the CF. After all, aside its resolutions which at best work as general guidelines, the CF does not produce any binding decisions or laws. While Caney (2016) has correctly argued that the mere existence of a parliamentary ‘think tank’ can ‘nudge’ decision-makers towards forward-oriented thinking, it cannot do much to curb the two root causes of political myopia – short electoral terms and powerful organized interests (Jacobs 2016). Considering this, the CF can also be seen as a ‘harmless sideshow’ detached from the usual parliamentary business. It poses no threat to anyone, and this contributes to its longevity.

What lessons can we draw from the Finnish experience? To conclude this paper, we discuss briefly different ways of facilitating more future-oriented parliamentary decision-making.

- 1) Adopting the Finnish model. As our analysis has shown, a specific ‘future committee’ can become institutionalized, but the challenge is how to connect it more directly to parliamentary work. One option is that the future committee would routinely produce statements on government bills, evaluating them in terms of long-term consequences (Caney 2016: 136). Yet this would simultaneously make the future committee more like a normal legislative committee, something that the Finnish CF has deliberately tried to avoid.
- 2) ‘Future’ as part of standard legislative scrutiny. Regardless of whether a specific future committee exists or not, the parliament could demand that each government draft bill would also include an assessment of its potential long-term effects. This would make forward-oriented thinking a routine part of the legislative process. The danger is that both the government and the MPs might nonetheless focus on the short-term effects of laws, paying much less attention to the ‘future’ part of the bills.
- 3) Identification of future issues by the whole parliament. At the start of the electoral term or the annual parliamentary session, the plenary could adopt a short list of ‘future’ topics for closer inspection. The parliament could then appoint working groups consisting of both MPs and external experts that would produce a report for the plenary. It is obviously difficult to predict how motivated MPs would be to invest their time into such work. Another possibility is thus that the government would be obliged to produce such reports.

- 4) Organising a special ‘future week’. In this scenario, the parliament together with select external stakeholders would hold a public session where MPs could debate various future-oriented issues.<sup>9</sup> The event would be broadcast live, thus providing an incentive for the MPs to take it seriously. Yet the same motivation problem as in the previous option above would probably apply.

It is perfectly understandable that MPs focus on issues that have tangible legislative or budgetary consequences. The Finnish Committee for the Future certainly deserves credit for trying to reduce political myopia. The absence of similar bodies in other legislatures suggests that introducing a long-term perspective to parliamentary work is not easy.

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<sup>9</sup> Also Caney (2016: 136-137) recommends a ‘Visions for the Future’ Day, where the parliament would scrutinize the government’s ‘Manifesto for the Future’.

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